

ELECTIONS 2022 WHY BJP IS CONFIDENT IN UP • AN INTERVIEW WITH YOGI ADITYANATH
ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL WITH AKHILESH YADAV • BALLADEERS OF THE BALLOT

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PUTIN'S WAR

THE NEW COLD WAR BEGINS BY BRAHMA CHELLANEY

THE GLOBAL FALLOUT BY M J AKBAR

A LETTER FROM WASHINGTON BY JAMES ASTILL

A UKRAINIAN SINGER'S CRY FOR HELP

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

Actor Madhuri Dixit has made a powerful comeback with her new web series *The Fame Game* ("The Return of the Queen" by Kaveree Bamzai, March 7, 2022). She holds centre stage on the Netflix show, which puts the spotlight on the glamour and struggles of a veteran Bollywood star and her dysfunctional family. Madhuri is an evergreen star and she proved it again with her performance in this Netflix original. Madhuri is known as the "dhak-dhak" girl of Bollywood. She made her debut with *Abodh* in 1984, and later became a leading actor in many films in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. In a career spanning almost four decades, she has delivered blockbusters like *Dil* (1990) and *Beta* (1992). But it was *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994) that made her the nation's sweetheart. Her dancing and acting skills sealed her place in tinsel town. The new series, *The Fame Game*, once again showcases her acting prowess. She is the perfect personification of grace and beauty. Painter MF Husain at one point considered Madhuri to be the epitome of womanhood. Her effortless charm, dancing skills, effervescent smile and "girl-next-door" image make the audience relate to her easily. At the same time, she is as glamorous as a star can be. She is and will always be the original queen of Bollywood. She has set a yardstick for all other heroines. Madhuri is the perfect balance of wholesome goodness and secret sensuality, of girly innocence and womanly wiles. Her craft is ageless as well as timeless, which is why she has fans across all age groups. Hopefully, she will continue to regale the audience with her "Madhuri magic".

S Pahwa

NECESSARY PROBE

The scandal involving a former managing director of the National Stock Exchange (NSE), Chitra Ramkrishna, and a mystic Himalayan "yogi" has tainted the reputation of the stock exchange ("Guilty or Gullible?", March 7, 2022). A thorough probe is needed to bring the scale of irregularities into the open. A Securities and Exchange Board of India order has detailed how Ramkrishna had appointed

an unqualified individual, Anand Subramanian, to a top management role and allowed him to take many crucial decisions. It also pointed out that sensitive market-related information was leaked over a period of years till Ramkrishna and Subramanian quit the exchange in late 2016.

RN Pillai

ICONIC ROLES

Veteran actor KPAC Lalitha, who died on February 22, was a legend in Malayalam



cinema ('A Cultural Icon', March 7, 2022). She could pull off any character and she played all her roles to perfection. One of her more memorable roles was as Narayani in *Mathilukal* (1990). She managed to stand out although she was never seen on screen. But her familiar voice from beyond the prison wall, conveying a variety of emotions, was one of the key elements of the film. She made the characters she played both believable and relatable. Lalitha heavily contributed to the success of Malayalam films.

MR Jayanthi

MUSIC AS A WAY OF LIFE

Renowned music composer and singer Bappi Lahiri revolutionised Indian film music through his peppy disco numbers ("Dancing to His Own Tune", February 28, 2022). His death has left a huge void in the world of music. The iconic composer had made music a way of life. Lahiri will be remembered for winning the hearts of his audience with his soulful songs and energetic renditions.

CK Subramaniam

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By S PRASANNARAJAN

WHAT DEMOCRACIES OWE UKRAINE

AUTOCRATS ABHOR THE present. They endure it as an assault on memory, as a bad reminder that further downgrades their diminished inheritance. The present is a country without justice; it's a lie exacerbated by the worst instincts of those who claim to have won history. In their rage against the present, autocrats travel back in time for rearmament, for the comfort of what could have been. The present is a site of permanent war, against enemies real and imaginary. It's a struggle for the rehabilitation of what they have been denied. Living in the present is an autocrat's dread.

The world once paid for their wars with the racial division of humanity as the pure and the corrupted. The scars have not yet healed; and the international order built in the aftermath of World War II has already shown its fragility. Behind every genocide, whether by the Khmer Rouge or the Nazis, was the playbook of rulers who subordinated the wretched present to the perfumed past. Even today, the favourite adjective that autocrats love to add to the future is 'great'. What lies between the past and the future, between greatness lost and greatness imagined, is the humiliation of the present. Its repudiation powers the politics of resentment that sweeps across today's autocracies. Their desperation taps into nationalist hysteria and xenophobic paranoia, tribal instincts and exclusivist fantasies; in their campaign, identity is a constant simulation. There is nothing for them in the moment they are condemned to.

Putin's forty-mile long convoy of death rolling into Ukraine is a time traveller's show of strength. It's a journey back to the recesses of loss and grievance. He's too isolated in his imperium of the mind ('Putin's Imperium of the Mind', *Open*, March 7) to realise how the sweep of his madness has turned the rebuilder of Greater Russia into a war criminal. For someone who sees the conventional methods of democracy as an impediment to the project of imperial restoration—a Soviet Union brought back from nostalgia—a war has always been an option. By launching a full-scale invasion, its horrors straight from the Nazi warbook, he has taken the world back to the age of expansive, militant nationalism that creates its mythology of racial exceptionalism to validate its terror. We haven't seen this kind of war since Nazi Germany's tanks crossed the borders after the farcical peace

diplomacy in Munich. Putin could do without the Chamberlains of today. In the new war, the time-travelling warlord is allowed easy passage by the free world, whose morality begins and ends with sanctions. The past is made safer for Putin by leaders lost in the compulsions of the present.

Autocrats' rejection of the present must be matched by democrats' commitment to it. Their stake in Ukraine is as historically urgent as the freedom alliance's rejoinder to the Nazis—paradoxically, even the empire that Putin craves for today finally joined it and suffered the biggest human loss among allied troops, a fact that he continues to remind the world. Today's America is hardly a leader of an alliance that will go beyond short-term morality—convenient today and untenable

tomorrow—and ensure that Ukraine and the life of its brave president are not lost to a Russian autocrat who believes that the West lacks the physical and moral commitment to stop him. Joe Biden's America has already made it real: America as an imperium exists only in the rhetoric of professional anti-imperialists from the Left. Withdrawing further into the safety of America First, with or without Trump, it is fast losing its interest in playing the idealist—the way it “de-occupied” Afghanistan would remain a lasting epitaph for the morally exhausted imperium. Robert Kagan sums up the American failure well in *The Jungle Grows Back*: “Americans, it is

fair to say, have not enjoyed power too much. These days, they would prefer to wield it less. Yet the struggle for power in the international system is eternal, and so is the struggle over beliefs and ideals. If it is not our system of security and our beliefs shaping the world order, it will be someone else's. If we do not preserve the liberal order, it will be replaced by another kind of order, or more likely by disorder and chaos of the kind we saw in the twentieth century.”

Aren't we there already? Aren't we there because the principles of the free world are outmatched by the pathologies of the world's most dangerous autocrat? Aren't we there because democracies are not the custodians—or promoters—of the liberal order any longer? They have ceded the present to the autocrat who tramples upon it for the sake of a phantom past. A federation of democracies can still save freedom with ideals and arms—and India should not let the moment pass. ■



INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

PRUDENT MANAGEMENT of the economy in a fiercely competitive polity has always been a challenge everywhere. More so in India. Until the forex crisis of 1990-91, our rulers were dead against anything that smacked of economic reforms and liberalisation. Under pressure from the Bretton Woods institutions, we opened up the economy—and have lived long enough to savour its multifaceted, though lopsided, benefits. Yet, a political class brought up on a rich diet of socialist rhetoric has always fought shy of endorsing reforms. Even those who felt obliged to undertake reforms did so stealthily, reluctant to own up, fearing unpopularity. Of course, the masses in whose name successive governments had imposed crippling controls and restrictions on growth were blissfully unconcerned. What mattered to the *aam aadmi* was the provision of *dal roti*, not how it was delivered, the socialism versus liberalisation contestation being a no-brainer. Some of the freest economies in the Western world served up a far more edifying menu of welfare schemes than the self-avowed socialist communist countries. The point is that pragmatism alone ought to inform all economic policy.

Unfortunately, as the latest round of Assembly elections show, the polity seems to be regressing into the old pre-reforms mould. There are no innocents here in this crowded field of political traders, fiercely fighting for votes by dangling carrots of free *bijli-paani*, rations and cooking gas, cash handouts, etc. But, in particular, my ire was aroused by the action of the Ashok Gehlot government which has now moved to undo the sterling reform of the pension scheme carried out by the Vajpayee government back in 2003. Instead of further finetuning the new scheme, junking it wholesale and reverting to the burdensome old pension scheme is a



direct assault on the reforms process.

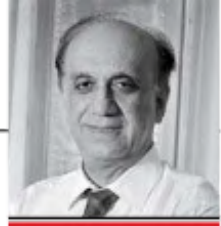
Many governments, state and local, in the US are now staring at bankruptcy, servicing the pension bill of the retirees. Given the rising life expectancy and shrinking budgets of governments burdening future generations with the ever-increasing expenditures on pensioners, it has become a headache for economic policymakers. If that is the case in the world's biggest economy, a middle-income country like India can barely sustain its unusually generous retirement package for the vast army of public servants. Thus, the new pension scheme replaced the wholly one-sided old scheme, wherein virtually half of the last pay drawn plus the up-to-date dearness allowance was guaranteed.

The new scheme, effective for those who joined service after April 1, 2004, matched employee contributions with the employer's, and thus, guarded against burdening future generations with the unsustainable expenditures. Now, reverting to the old pension scheme, only in order to curry favour with the organised and highly vocal sections of the electorate, negates the economic reforms. Worse, the Gehlot example is bound to be followed by other governments. Already, the beleaguered three-party ruling alliance in Maharashtra has let it be known that it is junking the

new pension scheme for the old, and financially fraught, one. Akhilesh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party has sought to woo the same constituency of public servants in Uttar Pradesh by promising to junk the pension reforms.

Which brings me to my perennial complaint against the so-called educated politicians. How many times have you heard in well-appointed drawing rooms "wish more educated people joined politics"? Of course, it is pointless to expect anything better from the few really educated ones who have come up in politics. For instance, in spite of knowing fully well the disastrous consequences of reversing the pension reforms, someone like P Chidambaram, who as Union finance minister had fully supported the new pension scheme, has chosen to maintain complete radio silence. Chidambaram certainly knows right from wrong. He could at least have picked up the phone and told his party colleague in Rajasthan to desist from moving the clock back on a reform carried out boldly at great political risk by the Vajpayee government in the run-up to the 2004 Lok Sabha polls.

Talking of the disenchantment with the so-called educated politicians, how is it that former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh hasn't thought it fit to tick off Gehlot? Come to think of it, the new pension scheme reckons among major reforms which greatly impact the budgets of governments. Why would the self-avowed father of reforms, who can break his *maun vrat* (silence) to intervene in the Punjab polls, countenance his own party chief minister moving the clock back on a thoroughly progressive reform? Why burden coming generations with unbearable pensions? Clearly, educated or not, politicians embrace the lowest common denominator. Without exception. ■



The Root Cause II

Hindus are a safe target for stand-up comedians

STAND-UP COMEDIANS, like circus clowns, are intrinsically sad people. Their job is to make others laugh. But they live in constant fear that their jokes will fall flat.

A stand-up's worst nightmare is stony silence from the audience after cracking a joke. Fortunately, that doesn't happen often. Those who go to stand-up shows know they are part of a choreographed event.

The comedian tells a long story with a funny ending and they are meant to laugh uproariously whether or not they found the joke, often a double entendre, funny. Like the professional comedian, they are a professional audience. They've paid to be entertained, and laughing, often at themselves, is a part of the entertainment.

The problem is stand-ups rely on funny stories that mock specific nationalities, accents and religions. Stand-ups aren't brave. They remember what happened to *Charlie Hebdo*, the French satirical magazine that published a caricature of Prophet Muhammad.

Two French Muslim brothers, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, stormed the *Charlie Hebdo* office in Paris in January 2015 during an editorial meeting and killed 12 staff editors, writers and illustrators. The two brothers were members of al-Qaeda which took responsibility for the attack.

A woman columnist at the editorial meeting, Sigolène Vinson, was spared. One of the assailants told her he was not killing her because she was a woman. He asked her to convert to Islam, read the Quran and wear a veil.

No stand-up makes fun of Islam or the Prophet. It's life-threatening. What about Jews? That's a no-go area too. Anti-Semitism is a criminal offence in some countries. Most comedians steer clear of anti-Jewish jokes.

How about Blacks? After the BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement, comedians, especially in the US and Europe, tread gingerly around anything that smacks, even remotely, of racism.

That leaves stand-ups with two safe options—Indians and Hindus. Check out a Russell Peters stand-up show on the internet. You'll find jokes tripping off Peters' tongue about Indian accents, vegetarian Indians, arranged Hindu marriages and big fat Indian weddings while the audience, including a smattering of Indians, giggles.

Jokes on how funnily Scots, Liverpoolians, Australians

and Americans from the deep south speak? Rare. Too close to paymasters. But Indian accents? No problem. Even the Indians in the audience laugh dutifully.

In India, Hindu stand-ups don't dare mock Islam. But Muslim stand-ups like Munawar Faruqui and Saad Shaikh don't think twice before making fun of Hinduism.

They take their cue from Bollywood where mocking Hindu idolatry (as in Aamir Khan's *PK*, 2014) is acceptable, but taking Islamist groups or political parties like Asaduddin Owaisi's All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen head-on is not. Stand-ups are comedians, not bravehearts.

All this begs a larger question: Why are Indians such a soft touch? One answer is lack of national self-confidence.

Comedians pick that up quickly. Indians are the ultimate good guys. Mock them, they'll applaud. So different from Muslims, Jews and Blacks.

But wait. Don't British comedians routinely make fun of the Queen? Don't American late night TV comics mercilessly parody American presidents? Of course, they do. But note the lack of malice (unless it's Trump) and the "we all know we're kidding" banter that goes along with the takedowns.

Get an American comedian to mock one of the country's founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, for being a Black

slave owner and you'll get stony silence. Or ask a British stand-up to mock Winston Churchill as a rabid racist whom the British public voted "Briton of the Millennium" in a BBC poll. Again, silence.

The freedom to offend is a comedian's right. The freedom to offend selectively, though it may seem unfair, too, is a comedian's right. Most stand-ups are sad people. They mock people as an antidote for their own insecurities.

India, with its multiple faultlines across religion, caste and politics, is a soft target. Middle-class Hindus don't complain even when asked to laugh at themselves. They are taught obedience: at home, in temples, at school.

Things are changing though. A new Hindu assertiveness is increasingly finding a sieve through which to express itself. There are consequences, however. For example, for Muslims, the hijab is no longer just a symbol of their identity. It is a pushback against this new Hindu assertiveness.

It threatens to upend a centuries-old order in which the mild Hindu turned the other cheek. ■

Hindus don't complain even when asked to laugh at themselves. They are taught obedience: at home, in temples, at school. Things are changing though. A new Hindu assertiveness is increasingly finding a sieve through which to express itself



MAGNETIC MAHARASHTRA 2.0

BUILDING A NEW INDUSTRIAL ERA OF GLOBAL EMINENCE



The Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC), conscientiously pursues its vision and mission of “Prosperity for all via Industrialization”, a sentiment prominently displayed during the challenging COVID-19 pandemic. Under the Magnetic Maharashtra 2.0 program, MIDC mobilized investments worth INR 1.89 lac crore that envisages to generate 3.3 lac high quality jobs across the state ensuring equitable regional development. A holistic approach involving state-of-the-art infrastructure, a large pool of skilled manpower, presence of prominent educational and research institutions, smart governance, pro-investor initiatives and excellent living conditions give Maharashtra an edge in attracting global investments.

To give momentum to balanced industrial development in Maharashtra, the state government by a special act in 1962 established MIDC, the special planning body, which through a vast network of local offices, has built 289 industrial parks over 2.25 lakh acres of land across the state. The Corporation by ensuring availability of encumbrance free land to entrepreneurs and investors from across the world has succeeded in attracting and fostering strong business relationships with global business players. This strategic move has catapulted Maharashtra in the top rank of the most industrialized state in the country with the highest contribution to India's GDP (15 percent).

A single point of contact between

investors/entrepreneurs and the government, MIDC hand holds them across the entire investment lifecycle from outreach to after care, which includes providing power, water and a lot more to businesses. Today, MIDC is developing smart industrial cities, plug and play infrastructure and has gone digital, drastically reducing the turnaround time for an industrialist to establish and run their business. Apart from being the largest Industrial Land Bank in the

country, a special cell of MIDC also helps investors to navigate regulatory challenges in getting environmental clearances.

Serving as the Government of Maharashtra's nodal Investment Promotion Agency, MIDC is not only the country's largest Industrial development authority but one of South East Asia's most competent Investment Promotion Authority. MIDC's dynamic approach has triggered a

**SERVING AS THE
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INVESTMENT
PROMOTION
AUTHORITY.**

multiplier effect to the economy enabling the state government to further achieve its socio-economic and infrastructure development goals, which includes generating employment and increasing purchasing power of the populace.

In a bid to bring suppliers, producers, sellers and buyers on to a common interactive platform, MIDC is developing specialized markets in all the districts of the state. India's first smart industrial city for Food Processing, Auto & Components, ESDM and Textile, AURIC Aurangabad has been developed as a part of Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor spread over 10,000 acres. An electronic and engineering smart city is coming up in Talegaon along with Hi-Tech city spread across 15,000 acres in Dighi Mangaon. The state is also in the process of finalizing engineering hubs at Khalapur in Raigad and Shahpur in Thane. A dedicated Data Center Park and Integrated Logistics Park has been envisioned in Taloja, which is already attracting investors. With the new IT policy under approval, many more IT parks and Data Center investments are expected to come up in the state. Nashik- Malegaon-Ahmednagar region is fast developing over 5000 acres with a Japanese Industrial Township in SUPA, Ahmednagar, in addition to Nashik becoming the hub for Aerospace and Defence sector. An area of 4000 acres in Nagpur- Amravati region is being developed as an epicenter of integrated textile value chain manufacturing. Maharashtra is implementing the Government of India initiatives such as the Electronic Manufacturing Cluster in co-ordination with STPI, besides 5 major Multi-Modal Logistic Parks in co-ordination with NHAI. A favorable policy environment coupled with infrastructure development initiated by the political and administrative leadership have helped the state in achieving this unprecedented growth.

Cluster development led by one or more major anchor units supported by MSMEs, is a key to the over-all growth of any sector. It is due to phenomenal industrialization that Maharashtra has one of the highest per capita incomes in the country. Presence of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) has led to the development of defence cluster in and around Nashik. Similarly, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) directive to all the Ordnance Factories for out-sourcing 25% of their production to the SMEs/MSMEs would give a huge impetus to them. Automobile and electronics manufacturing hubs in Pune are also such examples where the small component manufacturers have been able to increase their businesses manifold due to presence of

India's first smart industrial city for Food Processing, Auto & Components, ESDM and Textile, AURIC Aurangabad has been developed as a part of Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor spread over 10,000 acres.

An electronic and engineering smart city is coming up in Talegaon along with Hi-Tech city spread across 15,000 acres in Dighi Mangaon.



Emerging technologies along with the presence of diverse value chain and socio-economic diversity enables the state to have a range of world-class engineering, research and design hotspots.

large companies. Some of the biggest names in the Automobile industry, both domestic and international, such as Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra, Mercedes Benz, Volkswagen to name a few have set up shop in Maharashtra. It has given impetus to create the strongest OEM base of auto-components manufacturers in the country. Adding to its strength, the new EV policy of the state has already attracted multiple investments in the EV sector and last year Maharashtra registered the highest number of EV sales.

Furthermore, the state has nurtured a dynamic innovation ecosystem with the help of progressive policies, vast skilled talent pool, competitive infrastructure and fast-growing R&D footprint. A well-established IT industry has helped Maharashtra mature as a supply and demand market for technology. Leaders like IBM, Microsoft, Amazon, HP, Cisco and many more have chosen Maharashtra as their 'home'. Currently, there are 170 IT & ITeS parks operational and with the new IT Policy underway, there are many more such parks expected. The state accounts for more than 20% of India's software exports, with over 1,200 software units established across the state. Mumbai and Pune are the major IT & ITeS centers in the state followed by Nagpur and Aurangabad. Emerging technologies along with the presence of diverse value chain and socio-economic diversity enables the state to have a range of world-class engineering, research and design hotspots.

Maharashtra government's strong focus on political stability, swift policy development, law & order and stakeholder consultations, besides adapting new technologies has kept the state ahead of the curve in a rapidly evolving global environment. This makes Maharashtra amongst the most trusted and profitable states to invest in, and a prosperous global business destination worth exploring! ■



Scream of India

Have we become a nation of shouters?

THERE IS SOMETHING distinctly wrong with us as a country. It is now unbearable but then we have no choice. From a nation of shopkeepers, we have become a nation of shouters. I don't know what there is in the Indian diet that gives us such loud voices and the impunity to speak at a deafening pitch. Look around and you will hear loud people. From fine dining restaurants to parks to airplanes to railway compartments to schools and even homes. Even people manning call centres shout as if you were deaf or using a faded hearing aid. Is there something in our primary education? In our breeding? In our DNA? In our civilisational legacy which makes us shout for the smallest things?

Hotel lobbies have louts who are shouting; hotel gyms have screeching music that would put a tenor to shame; hotel spas have music playing at decibel levels that would destroy your sanity. Every Chinese restaurant plays the same instrumental music hoping you'd imagine you're in Beijing, but actually reminiscent of Bhendi Bazar. I guess the Birlas understood it right. When they were manufacturing the Ambassador car, they made sure everything in the car made a noise except for the horn so that you wouldn't abuse the horn.

We got liberalisation in 1991; then came the internet boom; then came successive prime ministers; then the IPL; followed by scams; then came Modi: a lot changed except sound levels. Go to a cinema hall and you need earplugs. I rarely go to a cinema hall but on the one occasion I did, I couldn't hear myself breathe. They were playing the movie at decibel levels that would drive you nuts. I asked for the manager and he then told me if you reduce the volume, people object. I told him even if he were to reduce it by three notches, it would still be audible to which he replied with pithy humour saying many people come to the cinema with their spouses and don't want to hear their "*khich-khich*": crafty explanation for a prospective burst eardrum.

I have often wondered why is it that we shout so much? I can understand shouting on TV because if you are one

of the 11 panellists, the only way you can be heard is if you shout. Or get noticed if you go to sleep during the live programme. Most television anchors must either be on drugs or on Benadryl if they can sustain their SQ (shouting quotient) evening after evening. We all remember what one former president did to an anchor who kept shouting the questions out to him rather than asking him politely. I always thought we had far too much shouting on English news channels till I appeared on Hindi channels. We have nine rescue dogs and each one of them went nuts. It was obviously the decibels and not the content that left them both stirred and shaken.

Why is it that many louts board flights in India and start watching some ghastly show on their ugly mobile devices without using ear plugs? Morning flights are even worse. Between trying to decipher their seats since literacy hasn't taught them to read a boarding pass and then finding their seats, they are playing religious hymns. I don't want to get on to the mosque issue but then if five times a day you are woken up by someone who's saying things you don't understand, it is a trifle inconvenient. I guess it's the same for all religions who use microphones to herd their flock.

Go to a stadium and see the levels of noise there. It's a miracle that our cricketers can actually play the game in India. Imagine you're fielding at the boundary: the chances are more people will either tell you what to do or, if you are in Kolkata, be discussing their lunch order. Not to mention getting into a fight over which stroke should have been played?

Finally, look at our myriad temples of democracy: be it Parliament or state legislatures: earlier, they would know how to speak into a microphone, but see them now (if you have nothing better to do): it's almost as if they are asking the microphone to move up to their chapped lips rather than adjusting the damn microphone, and what does this lethargy or idiocy lead to? Shouting again.

We have moved as a nation from being one of speakers to now of shouters. Whither civility? ■

THEY WERE PLAYING THE MOVIE AT DECIBEL LEVELS THAT WOULD DRIVE YOU NUTS. THE MANAGER TOLD ME IF YOU REDUCE THE VOLUME, PEOPLE OBJECT. I TOLD HIM EVEN IF HE WERE TO REDUCE IT BY THREE NOTCHES, IT WOULD STILL BE AUDIBLE. HE REPLIED MANY PEOPLE COME TO THE CINEMA WITH THEIR SPOUSES AND DON'T WANT TO HEAR THEIR 'KHICH-KHICH'

March 2022

By **Dr. Sohini Sastri**
National Award Winning Astrologer
www.sohinisastri.com

Aries (Mar 21 - Apr 19): Aries Horoscope March based on Vedic Astrology reveals that the planet Mars will enter the zodiac sign Sagittarius in the latter half of the month, i.e. 16 March, which will turn out to be favourable from a financial point of view. This transit will prove to bring a wave of positive outcomes in the lives of Aries natives.

Taurus (Apr 20 - May 20): As per Taurus Horoscope March, the natives are bound to attain average results in various aspects of life this month. With the transit of Mars on March in Sagittarius, luck will favour you in major aspects of your life. You will incur favourable outcomes in the field of your career, and your professional life will bloom. Also, with Saturn placed in the tenth house from your sign, multiple sources of income will arise.

Gemini (May 21 - Jun 20): According to Gemini Horoscope March based on the principles of Vedic Astrology, planetary movement suggests several challenges and opportunities coming in the way of Gemini natives. Saturn in its own sign in the eighth house from March can incur a financial loss as well as health challenges and sufferings. This can prove to be a testing time for natives of the Gemini zodiac sign.

Cancer (Jun 21 - Jul 23): The presence of Saturn in your seventh house at the beginning of this month can give rise to several problems in life. But with the transit of Mars in Sagittarius on 16 January, your level of confidence will increase and you will be able to get rid of several problems instantly. However, Mars in the house of leisure and happiness can give rise to health problems for your mother. Hence, take good care of her and look after what she eats and drinks.

Leo (Jul 24 - Aug 22): With the transit of sign-lord Sun in the fifth house at the beginning of the month, financial conditions will improve. The transit of Mars from January-end till March will improve your child's health to a great extent. Mars in the sixth house from your sign on 26 February while aspecting the house of luck and fortune will incur great success in your professional life. However, natives are suggested to remain a little alert in the months of February and April since planetary conjunctions and movements can turn out to be unfavourable.

Virgo (Aug 23 - Sep 22): According to Virgo Horoscope March, Virgo natives will enjoy great wealth and financial prosperity at the beginning of March as a result of Mars in Sagittarius in the month of March. However, things can go downhill healthwise, as they can suffer from minor health troubles. The months of April, June and September seem to be unfavourable as well as concerns from a health point of view. The transit of Mars in Capricorn and the fifth house from your sign from 26 March will lead to optimistic academic results for Virgo natives.

Libra (Sep 23 - Oct 22): As per Vedic Astrology, Libra Horoscope March predictions reveal that the beginning of this month will incur favourable results physically, mentally and careerwise, but things can take a U-Turn when we talk about business and family. The transit of Mars in Sagittarius in the middle of March will incur favourable financial results and profits. Saturn, Mars, Mercury and Venus forming the Chatur Graha Yoga at the beginning of March will result in financial success and smooth cash flow.

Scorpio (Oct 23 - Nov 22): According to Scorpio Horoscope March, this Month will be full of mixed results for Scorpio natives. There will be unnecessary expenses from the beginning of March till March. During the end of the month, the transit of the planet Saturn in Aquarius will deliver mixed results in your career, financial as well as family life. The transit of Jupiter in Pisces during mid-April in the fifth house from your zodiac sign will bring a major improvement in your financial conditions.

Sagittarius (Nov 23 - Dec 21): Sagittarius Horoscope March as per Vedic Astrology predicts that this month will turn out to be favourable for Sagittarius natives in terms of finances. During the march, the planet Mars will transit in your zodiac sign and help to strengthen your financial conditions to a certain level. In terms of academics, the beginning of the month March will be favourable for students.

Capricorn (Dec 22 - Jan 19): According to the Capricorn Horoscope March as per Vedic Astrology, this month will prove to be full of ups and downs for Capricorn natives. The placement of Saturn in its own sign during the beginning of this month proves to be favourable for your career finances and academics. However, its transit in the month of April can bring challenges in various aspects of life.

Aquarius (Jan 20 - Feb 18): As per Aquarius Horoscope March, this month will remain mostly favourable for the natives of the Aquarius zodiac sign. In terms of finances, this month turned out well. The transit of Mars in the month of January will benefit you financially. The conjunction of four major planets, i.e. Saturn, Mars, Mercury and Venus, during the beginning of March will help you succeed in your endeavours and Inka good wealth. However, the transit of Rahu on the 12th March in Aries and the third house from your sign can make you make impulsive decisions. You should take good care of such things and not let anything influence you.

Pisces (Feb 19 - Mar 20): The month March will turn out to be majorly favourable for Pisces natives according to Pisces Horoscope. You will remain financially prosperous for most of this month. The placement of Saturn from the eleventh to the twelfth house in the month of march will give rise to new sources of income.



OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

Out of the Mask

LAST MONTH, THE Maharashtra cabinet had a discussion on the removal of masks. This was because the Omicron wave had subsided. Mumbai now sometimes sees the number of cases in double digits. Almost certainly, the vast majority have been infected and developed antibodies. Any immediate future wave seems unlikely. The pandemic could very well have become endemic but that is only something that time will tell given that the future is unpredictable. A *Hindu Business Line* report on the cabinet meeting said: "The State government's Covid-19 Task Force will study the possibility of canceling mandatory face masks in the State and submit the report to the government. The State Cabinet meeting held on Thursday discussed the possibility of canceling mandatory masks. Some of the cabinet members said that many countries including England have scrapped rules that made masks compulsory." And yet, more than a month later, the state's Health Minister Rajesh Tope, who keeps getting asked this question, had no definitive answer. Maharashtra, this week, in fact, reduced further most of the lockdown curbs to a point that life can be almost normal. Cinemas, gyms, restaurants, etc, for example, can now operate at 100 per cent capacity. But there was still the persistence of the mask. This was a decision too early to take, in the reckoning of the government. As a *Mint* report said: "When asked about further relaxation of Covid norms, including doing away with the face mask rule, Tope said, 'Chief Minister [Uddhav Thackeray] is constantly saying that we cannot assume that pandemic is over. So the decision on mask liberty will be taken after careful consideration.'"

The reason why in the first place they began to mull the question—other countries doing away with mask mandates—is only increasing. A day before US President Joe Biden gave his State of the Union address this week,

the White House staff got a memo of the mask mandate's removal. *New York Times* reported: "Effective tomorrow, Tuesday, March 1, we are lifting the requirement that fully vaccinated individuals wear masks on the White House campus," the memo said. It added: "Some individuals will choose to continue to wear masks to protect themselves. We must respect these choices." Almost all US states have relaxed the requirement. A *CNN* report of March 1 began by noting, "Even some of the most ardent supporters of Covid-19 precautions are ditching mask mandates as health officials release new guidelines and hospitalizations plummet. Across the country, more governors are letting go of mask rules—including in states that have long held on to school mask mandates. California, Oregon and Washington state will shift from mask requirements to mask recommendations in schools starting at 11:59 p.m. March 11, according to a statement from the governors Monday. California is also dropping its requirement for unvaccinated people to wear masks in most indoor settings starting Tuesday, Gov. Gavin Newsom's office said. But masks will still be strongly recommended for everyone in most indoor settings."

A recommendation, according to one school of dissent-

ing thought in the pandemic, was how it should always have been. People should be allowed to choose their own safety levels. What a mandate does is a legal insistence, the state telling you to either comply voluntarily or be forced into it under threat of punishment. That has precedent in history, as in the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic. But those were few and far between unlike today when it is an overarching global phenomenon. This is probably the first time that the mask has become a fixture of what the human race wears.

The mask mandate also led to peculiarities. Like the irrational idea that even inside a car when there is no one else but you, masks

Like Mumbai, Delhi, too, has done away with most lockdown restrictions except for the wearing of masks. In the absence of any unexpected virus twists, it will be the same in all of India soon. The shedding of the mask will be the final signal that says the country now believes Covid is behind us, the marker that divides the pandemic and post-pandemic eras



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

must be worn. Once the state feels compelled to take steps in the face of a panic that they do not know how to quell, overreach is certain. Places like Delhi and Mumbai where this was enforced has done away with the rule.

Did masks do anything to change the course of the pandemic? If we look at the numerous waves and how prevalent infections have been, probably not. You could still make an argument for masks for the Delta variant but the virus just got smarter. With a contagion like the Omicron variant, cloth masks were simply useless. And N95 masks, which in theory did work, need to be worn in the correct manner as medical professionals are trained to do, usually something that lay people have no clue about.

A possible salutary offshoot of wearing face masks in India has been, at least anecdotally, a reduction in the number of other common respiratory diseases, like colds and flus. In countries like Japan, there was a culture of wearing face masks if you are ill even before Covid, something done for the safety of others. India has had no such traditions of health courtesy but once forced onto us, it might have done some good. But will we persist? Almost definitely not. Public health experts say that even if masks are made voluntary, there would be conditions—high transmission pockets or crowded events—where one should wear masks. Chances are only a fraction will be interested in such self-guidance. Even now in most cities, among the vast numbers who don't wear masks in the open, you can also see policemen, though they are the ones who have to catch and fine the unmasked. Without

prodding from their superiors, they don't feel any need to. In any case, in the open air, masks are not really needed as a preventive measure. A recent *New York Times* article titled 'Should You Still Wear a Mask', which had the opinion of experts, had this to say: "There's little scientific evidence to show that face coverings offer much added protection in many outdoor spaces such as sidewalks or parks. Things get a little hairier with crowds, like at a concert or sports venue."

Like Mumbai, Delhi, too, has done away with most lockdown restrictions except for the wearing of masks. In the absence of any unexpected virus twists, it will be the same in all of India soon. The shedding of the mask will be the final signal that says the country now believes Covid is behind us, the marker that divides the pandemic and post-pandemic eras. It was also the mask's presence that signalled the pandemic. I remember two years ago in March, a week or two before the prime minister announced the first lockdown, travelling in a suburban local in Mumbai and seeing a man with a mask in there and sniggering to myself on the absurdity of it. But soon, all of India, including me, had a collection of masks and it became an ordinary item of everyday life. But when there is a choice, it is an irritant. Most people only wore them because of social peer pressure and the fear of the police. It is not something that anyone would find hard to give up except the government that has to make this decision. ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

PORTRAIT • AMITABH BACHCHAN

NATIONAL COACH

Who better than the grand patriarch of Bollywood to make caste visible and audible in his new film?

IT CAN'T BE EASY being Amitabh Bachchan in a country routinely given to reverence. Whether it is the government's Swachh Bharat Mission or a director's committed vision, he is supposed to embody both. Most nights, he is on TV asking general knowledge questions to squealing fans and respectful celebrities. Otherwise, he is routinely pushing products ranging from banking services to country expos. And yes, occasionally, he appears on the big screen reminding us once again of why he is called a legend.

So, no surprise then when Nagraj Manjule, one of India's most intense directors, wants to cross the wall between Marathi and mainstream cinema—much like the wall in the film dividing the upmarket school from the slum—he uses Bachchan's persona to carry his message. In his new film *Jhund*, Bachchan plays a school teacher who wants to create a football team out of children of the slum, most of them addicted to cheap drugs, given to stealing, and forced to do backbreaking work in the dark economy. "Apna to sadak ashiana hai/Aur footpath mast naram naram takiya hai/Khula aasmaan shamiana hai/The street is our bed, the footpath our pillow and the sky is our roof," reads the lyrics of one song.

Bachchan plays yet another Vijay in a long line of Vijays. Sometimes

his Vijay is rebellion personified as in *Deewaar* (1975), sometimes he is seething with silent rage in *Trishul* (1978), and at other times, he is blinded by revenge as in *Agneepath* (1990). In *Jhund*, as Vijay Barse, he is uplifted by the talent he sees among the youngsters in the slum. Regardless of the school management which is uncomfortable with the "filth" he is bringing into the school, Vijay persists with his project and transforms the youngsters from a *jhund* (horde) to a winning team. It takes practice, perseverance and patience. It takes years to wean them off one habit and make them adjust to new ways. But they finally do.

There is an added thrill here, to see the man who once embodied the entitled Nehru-Gandhi era and then subsequently was one of the first to recognise the rising power of Narendra Modi in Gujarat, bowing to a gigantic photograph of BR Ambedkar. Manjule, a Dalit himself, has made highly regarded and heartbreaking Marathi films, *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016). He believes caste is the most fundamental truth about Indian society and cannot be escaped. It is a reality that Bollywood movies are only now coming to terms with—the Dravidian movement in the south has made it a greater reality in Tamil movies. Who better than the grand patriarch of Hindi cinema to restore Ambedkar to his rightful position in the secular national pantheon? We exist as a democratic republic which espouses equality in large part thanks to him, and the Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations seen in the film establish this firmly. A bow from Bachchan seals the deal.

'Hum ko duniya ne roz dekha hai/phir bhi undekha jhund hai/The world sees us every day, and yet, we are invisible,' says a song. 'Apun ki basti gutter main hai/par tumhare dil main gandh hai/Our slum is in the gutter but your hearts are full of filth,' it goes on. Much like Neeraj Ghaywan's film *Masaan* (2015) and his short *Geeli Pucchi* (2021), *Jhund* puts the Dalit front and centre of the narrative, though it uses Bachchan's unique star power to become audible. We've had sport films before that have been beloved, *Lagaan* (2001) and *Chak De! India* (2007), but Bachchan's football coach is more than a mere mentor of the game. He has been elevated to national guide and country coach. In his 80th year and his 53rd year in the film industry, *Jhund* is an additional jewel in a shining filmography that shows the spectrum of a life well lived and full of fine performances. ■

By KAVEREE BAMZAI



ANGLE

CANCEL CULTURE EVOLVES



The consequences of taking away Putin's Taekwondo black belt

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

LONG BEFORE THE advent of cancel culture—pushing people into forced exile from public life—as a social media creation, it was a geopolitical phenomenon and the word for it was sanctions. It could only be done by superpowers. If Maldives imposed sanctions on China, it wasn't really going to work. But superpowers could back up the threat they were making. That was what the Cold War was about: two groups led by Soviet Union and the US living in a state of permanent sanctions against each other for decades. But then the former collapsed and now only one country had the power, not just because of its military prowess but also on account of owning the blood of commerce, the dollar, using which all international trade is conducted. This is how Russia has now been cancelled leading to the rouble tanking even if in a war with the US there is almost no chance of it losing because the earth would be just nuclear rubble by then.

Russia has been sanctioned earlier when it invaded and took Crimea. This time is somewhat unusual and not because the sanctions are going to be any more successful now. The difference is in how Vladimir Putin is no longer a black belt in Taekwondo. As *ESPN* reported, "World Taekwondo, citing its motto of 'Peace is more precious than triumph', condemned the Russian military action in Ukraine, saying the "brutal attacks on innocent lives" violated the sport's values of respect and tolerance. In this regard, World Taekwondo has decided to withdraw the honorary 9th dan black

belt conferred to Mr. Vladimir Putin in November 2013, the governing body said in a statement." He is also no longer honorary president of the International Judo Federation. The International Olympic Committee has banned Russia or at least anyone playing under the Russian banner. Even FIDE, the global chess body, has done the same.

But go back half a century, and you would see that at the height of the Cold War, Soviet Union and the US often boycotted the Olympics when it was held in the other's territory. But one bloc didn't get to tell whether the other should participate. When the US bombed Kosovo and invaded Iraq, their sportsmen didn't worry about their careers.

The Olympic Committee didn't get into the business of politics. You can understand US companies like Facebook and Twitter having to toe their government lines in censoring Russian accounts, but sport bodies are meant to be beyond a particular nation. And they are doing the cancelling without really any pressure because that is the kind of thing only dictatorships are meant to do.

All this, you could say, is what Putin and Russia deserve, and that may be true. But these are tricky waters for third parties as the immediate issue will get resolved sooner or later. That is just how it pans out in conflict between countries. Enemies become allies become enemies. But what about organisations that now have a precedent to defend? Should the US do another Afghanistan? Won't Russia and China ask why Americans are still playing chess? ■

IDEAS



GETTY IMAGES

LONGEVITY

Take any great champion in a sport and chances are what you see is not just how good he or she is at it, but also how long they remain in it. Sunil Gavaskar, Sachin Tendulkar, Roger Federer, Pele...they all held records, but also remained dominant for decades. And now in that pantheon is Virat Kohli who has just clocked 100 Tests. He has an average of 50, which is a half-century each. Performance and longevity are interlinked, one couldn't exist without the other. If someone has been part of a sport at the highest level for a long time, it is a given that he has also been very good at it. Otherwise, the sport would have dropped him earlier. ■

WORD'S WORTH

"To sustain longevity, you have to evolve"

ARIES SPEARS

AMERICAN STAND-UP COMEDIAN

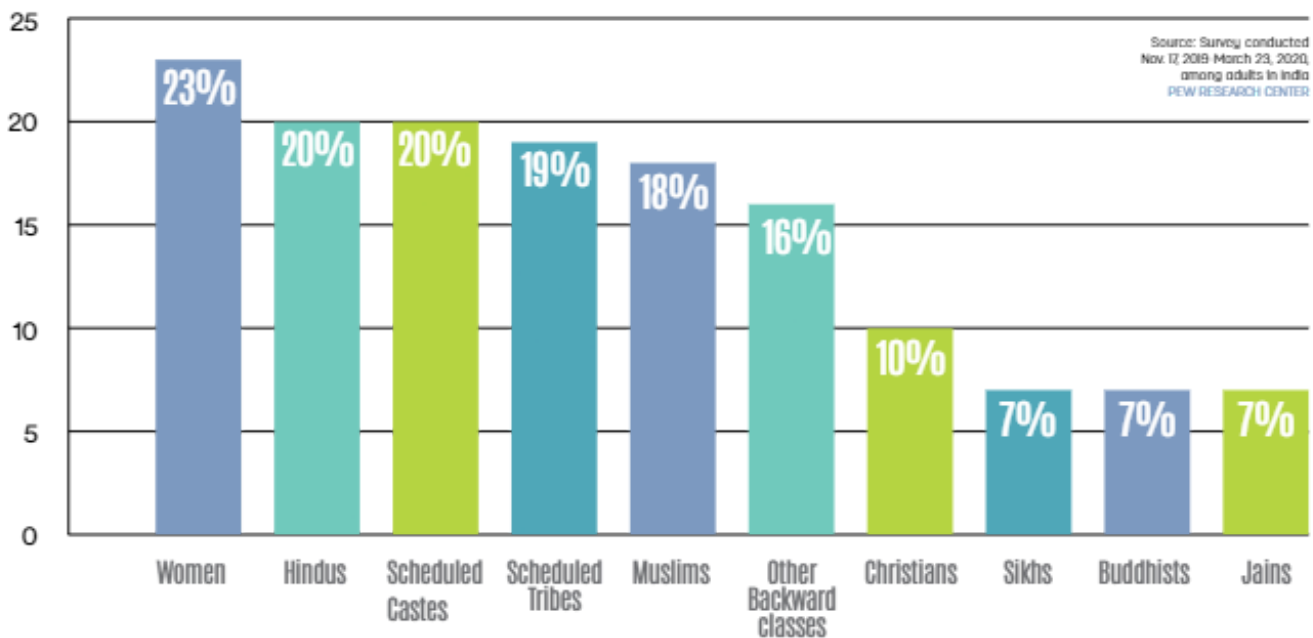
How Indians View Gender Roles

A new survey reveals a society divided between tradition and modernity

BY SIDDHARTH SINGH

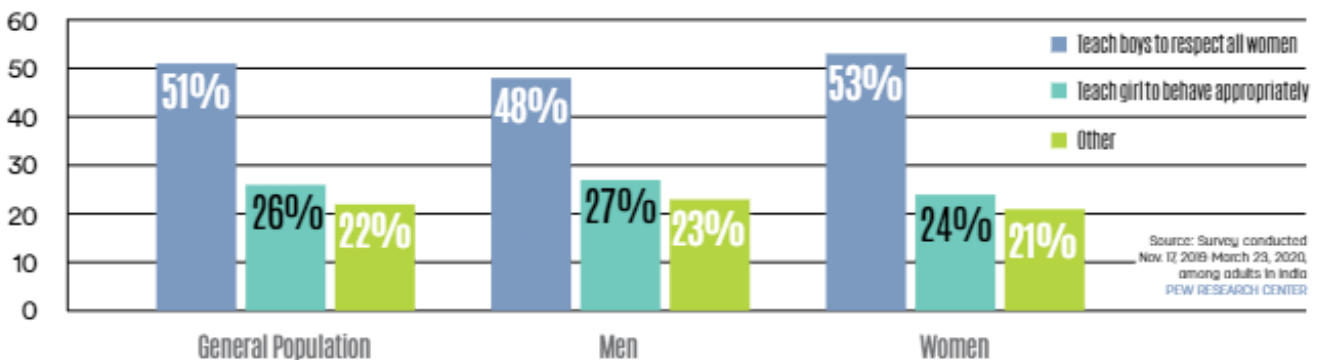
ABOUT A QUARTER OF INDIANS SAY WOMEN IN THE COUNTRY FACE A LOT OF DISCRIMINATION

% of Indian adults who say there is a lot of discrimination against ___ in India today



HALF OF INDIANS FAVOUR IMPROVING WOMEN'S SAFETY BY TEACHING BOYS TO RESPECT WOMEN

% of Indian adults who say to improve the safety of women in their community, it is more important to ...



PEW RESEARCH'S NEW report on India—"How Indians View Gender Roles in Families and Society"—released on March 2 sketches an interesting picture. India remains a traditional society but one where women are accepted in public and leadership roles. Majorities across religions feel that both women and men make equally good political leaders (page 40). This, despite a number of conservative perspectives, such as opposing legal

abortion, again a majority across all religions except Buddhism, and the latter very narrowly (46 per cent of Buddhists think abortion should be illegal in all/most cases) (page 51). Yet an overwhelming majority across religions (80 per cent overall) is in favour of gender equality. The survey casts India in a unique light: unlike traditional societies where public roles for women are circumscribed, India is more open in this respect even as it continues to value traditional gender roles.

INDIANS OVERWHELMINGLY SAY THEY VALUE GENDER EQUALITY

% of Indian adults who say it is very important for women to have the same rights as men

General population	80%
Hindus	81
Muslims	76
Christians	70
Sikhs	83
Buddhists	91
Jains	83
Men	79
Women	82
Ages 18-34	82
35+	79
Less than college	80
College graduate	84
General Category	80
Lower castes	81
Religion very important	83
Religion less important	65
Favourable view of BJP	83
Unfavourable view of BJP	76

Source: Survey conducted Nov 17, 2019-March 23, 2020, among adults in India. PEW RESEARCH CENTER

YOUNGER INDIANS, COLLEGE GRADUATES SOMEWHAT MORE LIKELY TO SAY WOMEN, MEN MAKE EQUALLY GOOD LEADERS

% of Indian adults who say that in general ...

Source: Survey conducted Nov 17, 2019-March 23, 2020, among adults in India. PEW RESEARCH CENTER

	Men make better political leaders than women	Women make better political leaders than men	Women and men make equally good political leaders
General population	25%	14%	55%
Hindus	24	15	56
Muslims	31	13	50
Christians	25	12	58
Sikhs	24	17	50
Buddhists	19	15	64
Jains	31	13	52
Men	29	13	55
Women	21	16	56
Ages 18-34	23	15	57
35+	27	14	54
Less than college	25	14	55
College graduate	22	14	62
General Category	28	16	51
Lower castes	24	14	57
Religion very important	25	14	57
Religion less important	27	16	50
Favourable view of BJP	25	15	57
Unfavourable view of BJP	29	15	53

INDIANS IN SOUTHERN STATES LESS OPPOSED TO LEGAL ABORTION

% of Indian adults who say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases

Haryana	90%	Punjab	58%
Chhattisgarh	88	West Bengal	52
Himachal Pradesh	82	Assam	50
Rajasthan	76	Andhra Pradesh	46
Delhi	73	Jammu and Kashmir	44
Meghalaya	68	Jharkhand	43
Madhya Pradesh	65	Maharashtra	41
Gujarat	63	Telangana	39
Uttar Pradesh	63	Kerala	35
Bihar	61	Karnataka	31
Odisha	58	Tamil Nadu	31

Source: Survey conducted Nov 17, 2019-March 23, 2020, among adults in India. PEW RESEARCH CENTER



Her Body, Her Choice

Where the hijab is not mandatory—and why

ON FEBRUARY 19, I had the pleasure of listening to the brilliant presentations of some of Pakistan's brightest students on my visit to the University of Lahore as a judge for the final day of its third annual National Policymaking Competition. Amid the Twitter din of a war against hijab in India's educational institutions, there was something I noticed with much interest.

Three outstanding women in their mid-twenties and mid-thirties. The one in an abaya, a Covid-19 mask on her face, was the university's director of Student Affairs. The other one wearing a colourful midi dress and pants, her head covered with a scarf, was the president of the university's Young Peace and Development Corps (YPDC). The third, dressed in pants and jacket with a scarf down her neck, was YPDC's general secretary.

The three women's apparel exemplifies the diversity evident in the choices of dressing at one of Lahore's leading universities. It is almost identical in almost all large and small cities of Pakistan. In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, despite religious and cultural imperatives, no single uniform code of dressing is applicable in colleges and universities.

It is important to understand that the Quranic injunction about purdah makes it mandatory for an adult Muslim woman to cover her head and body when outside her house, or in the company of a *na-mahram* (a person with whom it is lawful for a Muslim woman to marry). It is also important to understand that there is no worldly punishment for not following the religious edict of purdah.

The word "hijab" is not heard outside the orthodox, religious Pakistan. Pakistani women cover their heads, in various forms, without giving it any title.

Much has changed. Much remains unaltered. It is all there, in many shades of it's a man's world. The age-old norm of associating family honour with the 'goodness' of a female's character, the unquestioned double standards of the acceptable conduct for males and females, patriarchy thinly veiled in cultural acceptability, toxic masculinity garbed in regressive societal mores sharply sliced in favour of men, and religion used as a cover for keeping women 'in their place.'

The dress code for women is one of the most used instruments to whip a society into a 'manageable' mode. The covered body is the 'honourable' body in our part of the world where fully covered women are abused, beaten, harassed, raped, and murdered.

Throughout my life, I have seen the covering of head and body as a fundamental part of the clothing of Pakistani females, irrespective of their religious backgrounds. In my childhood and school years in the seventies and the eighties, dressing sensibilities underwent an obvious change during General Zia-ul-Haq's abrupt 'religionisation' of Pakistan. Covering of head became compulsory for women appearing as newscasters and anchors on Pakistan Television (PTV), but even then, TV and film actresses continued their work with their heads bare, and their clothing choices as per the demands of the role.

Forced to live with our paternal grandmother after my parents' separation when I was four years old, my sister, a three-year-old then, and I went to a convent school in a very conservative town with never-questioned feudal traditions. Growing up there, a dupatta on the head was an expected phenomenon in our teens, and in our case, even more so because of our grandmother's lifelong religiosity. On visits to our village, where my mother lived in her ancestral *haveli* with her mother and two younger brothers, both with part-time residence in Lahore, covered heads was as common as the freshness of rural air.

In the feudal families of Punjab and other parts of Pakistan, females dressed up—and still do—differently than the "common" people. It was and is more of a class custom than a religious practice. Centuries of entitlement and patriarchy, later perhaps combined with religious ethos, delineated rules of behaviour and clothing. Women of my immediate family and our close and distant relatives wore *chaddars*, thicker and larger versions of dupattas, when they visited one another or anyone else, or went for walks in the village. When in cities, although their dressing was still conservative, and included a dupatta, most women of my family, on both maternal and paternal sides, didn't cover their heads.

Kinnaird College, my all-girls alma mater in Lahore, had a

Christian principal, a sizeable Christian faculty and student body, some Parsis, and a large number of Muslim students. Everyone dressed differently. Dupattas, inside the college, were neither compulsory nor common.

Decades later, things have changed while remaining entrenched in class, culture, and religious parameters. In no particular order. The Pakistani elite, as do its regional and global counterparts, exists in its own bubble, high-walled by its own rules. The middle class live their lives caught up in the eternalness of “*log kya kahenge?*”/“What will people say?” The low-income stratum is weighed down by its diurnal fight for survival, and their priorities are clear, fighting for clothing

In the so-called ‘Arabisation’ of Pakistan, one conspicuous aspect is the ubiquitous abaya seen on all types of women, all over Pakistan. Popular for its flowy elegance, and its opaque covering of body and clothing, it is worn as an alternative to the traditional *chaddar* or burqa. Scarves cover the head, and the purdah is complete. In upscale Pakistan, some females going to gym or shopping, clad in athleisure or jeans, wear abayas as a shield against the male gaze, to not look different among the average Pakistanis, or to cover their bodies when not in their zones of comfort.

The ultra-religious consider the full covering of body and head the only way to live a pious life, and females, from that background, at a young age and later, accept it with an open mind. It is not conditioning, it is the embracing of a religious injunction without attaching to it any worldly considerations. Not just the orthodox, countless regular women adopt the covering of head simply as adhering to a teaching of their religion.

In 2022, Pakistan does not have a uniform dress code or a mandatory hijab in most of its educational institutions and workplaces. No one is singled out for covering their head. And even where it is considered unpopular, women are not penalised, at least on any institutional or governmental level, for not covering their head.

As a Muslim woman, I, like all Muslim women across the world, cover my head when praying. I cover my head when reciting the Holy Quran. I cover my head when I am in a religious gathering, attending a funeral, when I’m in my village, and sometimes out of respect for a religious person. No one, since I have been an adult, has told me to cover my head. I cover my head because it is part of my religion, my faith. Patriarchal mores, mostly, take away from a woman the agency, the autonomy, the freedom to choose. Sometimes, what appears to be a display of controlling the lives and fates of females is exactly that, and more. Many times, it is simply the other way to be. And the other way is not always the wrong way.

What is sometimes taken as a male-imposed rule, a ‘backward’ society overmarking its toxic boundaries, as stifling of the soul, and suppression of the freedom to be, is simply a woman deciding to live the way she wants to. Her will, her prerogative, her body, her choice. And following a religious injunction may sometimes just be the perfect answer. ■

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



IN 2022, PAKISTAN DOES NOT HAVE A UNIFORM DRESS CODE OR A MANDATORY HIJAB IN MOST OF ITS EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND WORKPLACES. NO ONE IS SINGLED OUT FOR COVERING THEIR HEAD. AND EVEN WHERE IT IS CONSIDERED UNPOPULAR, WOMEN ARE NOT PENALISED, AT LEAST ON ANY INSTITUTIONAL OR GOVERNMENTAL LEVEL, FOR NOT COVERING THEIR HEAD

liberalism being not among them.

Most females, of all religions, from the underprivileged or low-income backgrounds, work and for the younger lot, conservative and contemporary dressing codes exist in two parallel worlds—the simple dress inside the house, and the more modern clothing at the workplace. An abaya, while commuting from home to the workplace, keeps it all simple.



Call Them the Indian Team

With the World Cup upon us, it's time to get behind the blue brigade

When we left Mumbai to play in the World Cup in 2017 there were hardly any journalists who had come to the airport to see us off. But when we returned to India on July 25, having made the final, there were close to a hundred journalists at 2.30AM in the morning. I was surprised to see so many journalists and must tell you the flashes just did not stop. This was something totally new. Since then all of us have been flooded with interview requests and offers. We have been invited to events, have been felicitated and celebrated the country over. Today, people stop to recognise and greet us. I have been playing for India for 18 years now and this has never happened before. So, in that sense 2017 has made a huge difference to our sport.

—Mithali Raj, Captain

THEY ARE NOT THE WOMEN'S CRICKET TEAM

Sample this. Barely a dozen journalists were present at the press conference where India captain Mithali Raj outlined her plans for what was to be the biggest tournament of her career, before leaving for England in June 2017. On July 26, more than 60 journalists and cameramen flocked to the Grand Ballroom of the JW Marriot in Mumbai, where Raj and her girls fronted the felicitation presser, less than three days after coming second best to England in a closely contested World Cup final.

Yes, you read that right: in the dead of night, the Mumbai airport was teeming with fans, junior cricketers, policemen and the media, who couldn't seem to get enough of the Indian team.

Even when Jhulan Goswami, one of the stars of the campaign, landed in Kolkata the next day, there were no fewer than 50 journalists present at NSCBI airport. The team was awarded ₹50 lakh each by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and other hefty monetary rewards and commendations were subsequently conferred on them by the state associations and Indian Railways.

The build-up to the final on July 23, 2017 had started early in the morning. Queues of Indian fans began making their way into the stadium well in advance of the start of play—a sight so very common whenever India plays at Lord's. Only this time, it wasn't Rohit Sharma and his boys. It was Raj, Goswami, Harmanpreet Kaur and Deepti Sharma and 11 other women, who had finally forced the Indian cricket fan in London and beyond to come to Lord's waving the

Tricolour and hollering for the blue brigade. Back home, the build-up was no less momentous. All India Radio, in a rare gesture, had organised live commentary in multiple languages and the host broadcaster was showing the match across eight different channels. Not to be left behind the news channels, which play a key role in generating buzz, all of them had multiple shows right through the day. Suffice to say, it was the biggest news event in the country on the day.

Furthermore, even when the team lost, the buzz did not diminish. From the prime minister of India down to other high-profile politicians, sports stars and Bollywood celebrities, social media was a rage, celebrating the achievement of Raj and her team. The sport, it was apparent, was no longer an also-ran. The team had done enough to lift it out of oblivion and shove it right at the centre of public discourse. Each of the players, stars in their own right, has been celebrated. In fact, the sport has only grown bigger since. With BCCI keen on a WIPL in the near future, the potential of the sport to scale newer heights is for all to see.

There were no television cameras in 1983 when Kapil Dev smashed that 175 against Zimbabwe and rescued India from the depths of despair. While the world missed out on seeing the heroics, for his teammates the knock had the effect of making them feel that a miracle was indeed possible. A dream that few dared to even think or speak about, turned into a reality in the next two weeks. Prior to the 1983 World Cup triumph, India's victories, few and far between, were hardly accorded the recognition they merited. With 1983, it all changed.

Harmanpreet Kaur's unbeaten innings of 171 against Australia in the 2017 semi-final, which was broadcast live across the world, had equal potential and more. Kaur was trending ahead of the newly elected president of India and had broken through as the emblem of a blue billion that dared to believe. Every six that came off Kaur's bat was a statement in itself. So what if the opposition had Meg Lanning and Ellyse Perry, Raj and her blue brigade were out there to seek immortality. The World Cup, for Kaur, Raj, Goswami and the other girls, was an opportunity that they couldn't afford to let go of. Even though they fell nine runs short of lifting the trophy, they had done enough.



Rajeshwari Gayakwad tries to run out Jenny Gunn in the World Cup final between India and England at Lord's, July 23, 2017

WE NEED A SUCCESSFUL 2022 WORLD CUP. WE MUST HAVE IT TO SECURE THE SPORT. NOT THE INDIAN WOMEN'S CRICKET TEAM. RATHER, **THE INDIAN TEAM. RAJ, THE CAPTAIN, WILL YET AGAIN GALVANISE THE NATION AND CORPORATE INDIA WILL BE FORCED TO TAKE NOTICE**

On August 14, 2016, Dipa Karmakar, the young gymnast from Tripura, made the world sit up and take notice of what an Indian is capable of when pitted against the best in the business, including the likes of Simone Biles, who took the gold for the US at the Rio Olympics. She was followed by Sakshi Malik, who helped lift the growing gloom in Rio and was bettered by PV Sindhu, who gave further impetus to an Indian badminton revolution that was begun by Saina Nehwal in London in 2012.

On July 23, 2017, 11 Indian girls stepped onto the hallowed turf at the Lord's cricket ground, knowing they were on the cusp of history. Rather, they were shaping history. Moments after the final came to a close, Abhinav Bindra tweeted saying, "Shit happens". Bindra, for the record, came the closest to a second-time podium finish at the Olympics in Rio, before eventually losing out in a tie-breaker. It was the closest one could get to a medal and yet not win. Was it pressure or was it just that moment? As Bindra says, it just happens. In that moment when Veda Krishnamurthy played a cross-batted slog trying to clear the infield and go big, she must have backed herself in doing so. Until then, she had been hitting the ball cleanly and there was no doubting her ability. But that particular shot did not work. And she knew it the moment she had hit it. A slight shake of the head as she set off for the single was proof of what she must have felt.

And then, it was the teenager Deepti. For her, this was as hard as it could ever get. The pressure of a World Cup final and the pressure of a billion expectations is not something one comes to deal with every day. Deepti, it must be said, will never face anything harder in her whole life than what she felt on the field that day. A charge to lift the ball over the bowlers head for a boundary and it was evident, she had the mettle. But could she finish the job that all of her seniors wanted her to? Seeking immortality is one thing but to achieve it is something very few have ever done. Deepti, it must be said, did her best at Lord's. In front of a packed stadium, she looked anything but a 19-year old.

REAL IMPACT OF THE CAMPAIGN?

With several years gone by, the moot question is what does the future hold for the sport?

For the record, India won 101 medals at the 2010 Commonwealth Games and it was our best showing ever. It was followed by an impressive performance at the 2010 Asian Games, with our boxers winning multiple medals, including a very important gold medal by Vijender Singh. The surge continued in London in the 2012 Olympics and India ended up with six medals for the first time in history, with podium finishes in boxing, shooting, wrestling and badminton. But soon enough it was all back to square one. With the Indian Olympic Association suspended for corruption and mismanagement in December 2012, the entire momentum was lost.

That's what we don't want for women's cricket. We need a successful 2022 World Cup. We must have it to secure the sport. With the World Cup upon us, it is time to get behind the blue brigade one more time. Not the Indian women's cricket team. Rather, the *Indian team*. Raj, the captain, leading an Indian team out in New Zealand will yet again galvanise the nation and corporate India will be forced to take notice. The women, lest we forget, are equal stakeholders in the decision-making as the men.

There is indeed enough momentum for a revolution. Only it should not get stymied by our penchant for not going deep down and effecting structural change.

And yes, there is enough for a gripping story to be written. As I said earlier, maybe another day, another time.

I will leave the last words of this column to Jhulan Goswami: "When older siblings [implying male siblings] needed one more person to play with, I was called upon to make up the numbers. After they finished playing, I practised all by myself because that was the only time I had access to the bat and the ball. From Chakdaha to New Zealand has indeed been an eventful journey."

Story there? Oh yes! ■



THE PUNJAB EQUATION

Ahead of the Punjab Assembly election results, there is speculation that if Congress emerges victorious, incumbent Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi will take his revenge against Navjot Singh Sidhu for his constant barbs. But in case Congress loses, former Chief Minister Amarinder Singh will be shouting from the rooftops against his chief detractor, Sidhu, in his former party, and in support of the victorious anti-Congress front. With Sidhu under fire from both ends, within Congress, several party leaders like Manish Tewari, Sunil Jakhar, and Jasbir Singh Gill are waiting to see the election outcome on March 10.

IMAGE OVERHAUL

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is seriously planning her Delhi strategy. Earlier, she was to land in Delhi after the March 10 state Assembly election results. There was even a plan to hold a parliamentary party meeting in Delhi on March 10 since the Parliament session will reconvene on March 15. But now she has called a meeting of her MPs in Kolkata. Straws in the wind indicate that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) may win Uttar Pradesh with a comfortable majority, which means the opposition has to redouble efforts. In that context, Banerjee wants to lead from the front. And ironically, she recently lauded the Centre's equidistance on the Ukraine issue.

It seems that she is keen on an image makeover.

A Handshake

As a pre-election PR exercise, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief Arvind Kejriwal is learnt to be in touch with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leadership. Kejriwal is not taking chances even if the Punjab results point to a hung Assembly. Thus, when AAP leader Raghav Chadha recently met prominent SAD leader Bikram Singh Majithia, it set tongues wagging.

The Strategist

What is the importance of being Prashant Kishor? The political strategist, after crafting Mamata Banerjee's West Bengal Assembly win last year, is learnt to have met Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao at the behest of Banerjee. We hear that Kishor went with a clear directive to discuss the opposition's presidential candidate, and even spoke with Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray. He is also planning Banerjee's Delhi visit.

UPHILL TASK

Traditionally, anti-incumbency rides high in Uttarakhand. Every five years, the state has a history of opting for a new government. It has rekindled hopes in the opposition Congress whose senior leaders believe that this time they will form the government. And a fight has erupted over who will be the next Congress chief minister of Uttarakhand. Though Rahul Gandhi has made his chief ministerial choice of Harish Rawat very clear, Pritam Singh and Harak Singh Rawat are in the race, too.



GOVERNOR RACE

After the state Assembly elections, a reshuffle of governors seems to be on the cards. We learn that the old BJP hand from UP, Santosh Gangwar, who failed to get a ticket for the state Assembly polls this time may just grab a governor's post if given a chance. Other names doing the rounds from BJP are those of former Union ministers Prakash Javadekar and Ravi Shankar Prasad.

Open Spat

In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena-BJP battle is out in the open. Sena leader Sanjay Raut has announced that the state government will take action against a dozen BJP leaders over hate speeches. Last year, BJP leader Narayan Rane was arrested after making a derogatory remark against Sena supremo and Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray. The Maharashtra government has even gone against actor Kangana Ranaut for her pro-BJP stance. Meanwhile, the Enforcement Directorate under the Union home ministry has raided the premises of influential Shiv Sena corporator Yashwant Jadhav on charges of tax evasion.

ORANGE CRUSH

Despite the BJP-SAD alliance coming apart in 2020, Home Minister Amit Shah maintains a cordial relationship with Akali leader Sukhbir Singh Badal and his wife Harsimrat Kaur Badal. Now, since Punjab happens to be India's largest *kinnow* (a high-yield mandarin hybrid) producer, the Badals are known to handpick the best *kinnows* from their Muktsar bastion for Shah each year. And when the fruits arrived this year, the home minister apparently termed them "sweeter", giving rise to myriad post-poll combinations.

Next Chief Minister?

Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai seems to be wielding power only in name. The man who is actually running Karnataka is none other than the old Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh hand, BL Santhosh. The 55-year-old former *pracharak* is known for his proximity to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, and may well take over as the state's next chief minister.

THE RETURN

There is renewed speculation about Varun Gandhi. As BJP MP, he was dropped from the party's national executive committee along with his mother Maneka after criticising the Lakhimpur Kheri violence last year. He was also vocal on the farmers' issue against the Union government and remains critical of several schemes launched by UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. We also know that he shares a solid bond with his cousin Priyanka Gandhi. Is it time for him to sign up with Congress? That's the latest gossip doing the rounds in UP.



HEADING THE PARTY

After the ongoing Assembly polls, BJP will prepare for the Himachal Pradesh polls in November. There is a growing buzz that party chief JP Nadda could be a good chief ministerial candidate. But then the question arises as to who would head the party in the 2024 General Election. Amit Shah again? After all, BJP veteran LK Advani set a precedent by heading the party for two separate terms.

OPEN
AVENUES



INTERNATIONAL
Women's
• DAY •



8TH MARCH



WomEntrepreneurs

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP & EMPOWERMENT

Igniting Leadership Agendas in the Ecosystem

Though Indian women have illuminated the country's political arena, cracked the glass ceilings of corporate boardrooms and, pushed through game-changing agendas for empowering women in society, it's going to be a rough ride to achieve the United Nations' sustainable goal of gender equality by 2030

In Goa at the Santa Monica Monastery a big surprise is its superb art works. And who were the artists behind these amazing creations? Nuns who joined this Augustinian nunnery in the 17th century! Cut off from the world—and even their loved ones, they had to adhere to the rigorous disciplinary rules, which included 'no speaking, no listening, no reading and no travelling'. Unable to live out their days under these strictures, created by men, the nuns found their voice in these stunning artworks.

Women all over the world, in particular in

patriarchal societies, have struggled against the secondary role, and discriminatory attitudes, defined for them by men in all avenues of life—economic, social or political. Traditionally, since the post-Vedic and epic period, such has been the conditioning by societal rules all over India, regardless of whether it's in rural areas or urban landscapes. It is only in the 20th century, kicked off by the National movement that changes slowly set in to tweak the balance.

All across India — in the rural landscape or urban spaces, women have been blazing

the trail of entrepreneurship and revelling in the empowerment that their life and work choices bring them. Whether heading the village panchayat or steering the course of a large bank as a CEO, or wowing the world as leading surgeon, it's a well-known fact that women are more adept at multi-tasking than men and this conditioning serves them well in efficiently discharging her professional responsibilities at the workplace. Nations across the world now recognise the importance of the contribution of women to a country's economic growth.



MAVIM: A Step Ahead than Yesterday

JYOTI THAKARE

On the 24th February, 1975, the State Govt Corporation of Government of Maharashtra founded the Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal (MAVIM) to mark International Women's Year. It aims for increased participation of women in the development goals through Self Help Groups (SHGs) ensuring social, economic and political justice at the grassroots through Sustainable Development.



EMPOWERING WOMEN

MAVIM has mobilized 99,670 SHGs in rural and 49,290 in urban under different schemes under CMRCs, (Community Managed Resource Centers). Till date, MAVIM has promoted 361 CMRCs under Tejaswini programme focusing on Agro Service Centers, Goatary related activities. Emphasis is on strategies promoting livelihood promotion. MAVIM has also trained around 29,890 of women elected as Sarpanch (head of the Village), member of Village Panchayat Jilla Parishad etc. to make them effective as PRI members for a greater role in decision making.

Health is another focus area for which MAVIM has implemented reproductive health programmes with the support of UNFPA. Under gender sensitization awareness program five key issues such as female feticide, women & child malnutrition, dowry and child marriage, assets creation, joint property ownership are being addressed. Proactive role of male members, are also elicited through the "MAVIM Mitra Mandal", who are trained and sensitized to help women against all kinds of discrimination and atrocities. Establishing drudgery reduction models at village level is another initiative.

FINANCE MATTERS

MAVIM has signed MOU's with several banks for strengthening micro financing.



Jyoti Thakare
Chairperson,
MAVIM

MAVIM - MILESTONES

- Skoch Award 2021 - For MAVIM "e-BUSINESS" Under Technology Category
- APMAS National level Award 2021 - For best performing Federations in India
- Sa-Dhan Water.org WSS Award 2021- For Water & Sanitation lending
- NITI Aayog Resource Book-Case studies by MAVIM - "Joint ownership of assets and "Organic Rice Production by SRI"

Due to the intervention of MAVIM, SHGs have saved around Rs. 744.46 Crore and ensure timely repayment of all loans. So far, SHGs have received a total amount of Rs.5076.84 Crore from the lending banks. Meanwhile, CMRCs is creating awareness among the members about the government sponsored insurance products for rural poor and helping easy settlement of claims. Annual outcome Survey (AOS) to identify the area of concern and qualitative progress of operations are conducted periodically by MAVIM.

LEVERAGING SHG

During 1994-2002, MAVIM successfully implemented IFAD-assisted Maharashtra

Rural Credit Program (MRCP) for providing access to credit, information, and knowledge to poor rural women. Followed by MRCP, MAVIM had implemented various developmental schemes assisted by central 7 states Govt. through medium of SHG's.

MAVIM has partnered with various organization and has also forged ties with number of partners including business partners, technical organizations, CSR partners, banks/financial institutions etc. And out of all the banks ICICI Bank is the one which has helped MAVIM at a very initial stage when there was no support from any other bank. Now it is a 10 year trusted relationship between MAVIM & ICICI Bank.

SOME LANDMARK INITIATIVES

MAVIM has planned a COE at MAVIM Ghar, Nagpur which will be developed as State Training center and part of Centre of Excellence process to work on areas like SHG approach for community development. Looking at the ground strength of SHG women who are also marginal farmers, at least 35 women lead FPC/FPOs will be made functional as aggregators at district level under Nav Tejaswini program. Programs like SMART by Agriculture Dept & MAGNET by Maharashtra State Agriculture Marketing Board (MSAMB) along with Nav Tejaswini would be the first step towards formation of women led FPCs.

Leveraging technology, MAVIM has digitized SHG member details and created an "E-biz" platform where CMRC would be the single point of contact for buyers. So far 92,000 farmers data have been uploaded into the system.

Since the Covid pandemic, 60% of SHGs are making digital payment. MAVIM has tied up with "Oxygen" company to enable SHG members to operate small ATM machines (Swipe machines) for digital payments and earn some income. Taking its objective forward, MAVIM would soon launch its digital platform similar to Amazon & FlipKart, which will give digital access to the poor to publish their product on the website on nominal charges.

Vision to a healthy future

ABHA DAMANI

Ms. Abha Damani, Director, ICPA Health Products Ltd (ICPA) is a second generation entrepreneur and a post graduate in Business & Economics. In charge of Operations, International Business and Finance, she scaled up exports to make ICPA a formidable player in the international markets. Today, ICPA supplies and exports to more than 18 countries and is a leader in the oral healthcare segments in Sri Lanka, Oman, UAE and Nepal.

Q&A

Abha Damani
Director, ICPA
Health Products Ltd.
Zodiac: **Gemini**





JOURNEY OF ICPA HEALTH PRODUCTS LTD

ICPA Health Products Ltd. (ICPA) is India's leading pharmaceutical companies specializing in the oral healthcare segment. My father, Mr. Rohit Mehta, Founder & Managing Director started ICPA in 1972. Right off the bat, he established ICPA as the pioneer in the Strontium Chloride segment by introducing toothpaste with this formulation in 1974. Through the years, ICPA maintained its focus in the oral healthcare segment with a portfolio comprising of 74 different products. We created products like Thermoseal and Hexidine which continue to remain the most popular and recommended toothpaste and mouthwash by dentists. Over the last 49 years, we have been scaling up presence across domestic and international markets while also expanding our offerings in dermatology, haemorrhoids and ENT segments. Today, we are present in the FMCG segment too with an array of products in perfumes, sanitizers, hand washes, disinfectants and soaps, among others.

YOUR FORAY INTO BUSINESS

I joined ICPA in the year 2000 and spent the first seven years mostly getting acquainted with the business and understanding the company. As part of my first project at ICPA, I undertook the responsibility of upgrading the manufacturing systems which included modernizing the plant. The objective was to bring in more efficiency and productivity through implementation of processes. Today, our R&D and manufacturing plant in Ankleshwar, Gujarat is one of India's most technologically advanced facilities in oral healthcare and is certified by the EU, WHO GMP and ISO.

HOW IT ALL STARTED?

Back in the 70s, when most pharmaceutical companies were trying to expand their product offerings, ICPA decided to focus solely on dental products. We continue to maintain our focus and identity as

specialists in the oral healthcare segment even today. The total prescription-based oral care market in India is a little over Rs.1,000 crores and ICPA has a market share of approximately 16 per cent in the segment making us the second largest Pharma Company in the segment. We also rank amongst the top 100 Pharma companies in India.

THE FUTURE EXPANSION PLANS ETC.

Today ICPA enjoys international presence in over 18 countries across South-East Asia, Middle-East, UK, Australia and French West Africa. Our flagship product - Hexidine is the recommended mouthwash for COVID19 symptom management. Now we are looking at consolidating our business and ramping up our production to meet the growing needs of the markets in the country and abroad. In the immediate future, we will be increasing our offerings in oral hygiene, especially mouthwashes. We have been promoting our mouthwashes for anti-viral and anti-bacterial treatments since the need for

launch of ICPAMOX – CV 625, which is meant to treat odontogenic infections and have planned to gradually increase our spread in the antibiotics. We will maintain our position in the oral hygiene segment and being one of the key players, the new product innovations based on dentists' needs, will be our core strategy to further grow in this vertical.

HARBINGER OF CHANGE

We are witnessing a change in the market dynamics with regards to prescription based oral hygiene products. The evolution of the OTC is enticing more key players to enter segment and fragment the market. At the same time, the generic segment, to some extent, will also impact the market on the pricing front. The OTC segment and online sales platforms will be the key areas where we plan to deploy significant investment in terms of developing technology and resources. We have been growing at just over 15 per cent growth rate over the last decade and plan to become an Rs.500-crore company by 2028.

BIGGEST STRENGTH OF THE ORGANIZATION

Value for money is ICPA's biggest strength. We create the best quality in Oral Healthcare products at the most affordable prices.

YOUR PASSION/HOBBY

I enjoy reading and sketching. I love to play Chess whenever time permits.

YOUR FITNESS MANTRA

5 days a week, I dedicate an hour or two exercising. I am extremely health conscious and try my best to not deviate from my fitness regime

YOUR VIEWPOINT ON SUCCESS

I believe that success is subjective and for me, maintaining a balance across all aspects of life is the key to success.

YOUR FAVORITE PAST TIME

Reading, writing, travelling, spending time with my family.

We will maintain our position in the oral hygiene segment and being one of the key players, the new product innovations based on dentists' needs, will be our core strategy to further grow in this vertical.

these products has increased during the pandemic. We are also exploring the scope for new products and have accelerated our marketing efforts in the disinfectant segment for hospitals and other medical institutions. We recently also forayed into antibiotics with the

Harbinger of Change

YASMIN KAPOOR

Yasmin Kapoor is not desperate to impress, she is a formidable woman who has reinvented the face of India's air travellers and tourists in the travel retail segment with a stamp of authority.

Q&A

(Left)

Ms. Yasmin Kapoor
Director, IDFS Group
with her daughter
Karina

Zodiac: **Libra**





Kapoor almost single-handedly established the Indian Duty-Free Services Pvt Ltd (IDFS), creating room for fresh experiences for travellers and tourists in the retail segment. She may have faced all kinds of adversities in the Indian market, but emerged smiling and rich.

The price of her success is reflected at the expansive duty-free zone of Delhi's international airport. Once it had a handful of glorified shops, now it looks like an extended shopping mall offering a world class multi category retail experience.

She comes from a strong business family and after completing her masters in Comparative English, Kapoor decided to venture out to establish her own business. With an innate liking and interest in retail, she started with a concept to showcase global products in luxury travel retail and domestic retail markets.

This was back in the 90s, when Kapoor could hardly talk about her work with extended families for the fear of judgement, common in Indian families. This, however, did not deter her from expanding the liquor and cigar portfolios and, in turn, bringing brands like Sampoorna from Indonesia, Karelia from Greece Imperial Tobacco from the UK-creating the Single Malt Experience Zone, and operating the largest Cigar Humidor range in India in the Travel retail segment.

It was under her stewardship the company established their domestic retail wing with Koncept Retail Services in 2017-18. The Indian cosmetic market felt threatened as Kapoor brought top quality retail standards at domestic airports showcasing the best of international prestige and niche brands.

In short, she changed the dynamics of luxury shopping experiences in India. Let's read into her mind to know the person behind such prolific achievements:

HARBINGER OF CHANGE

Well, I am glad I could carve a niche

brought about that change.

ON BEING A WOMAN ENTREPRENEUR

My family backed me. But when I was building IDFS, I spent more time in the office and less at home. I would often feel guilty that I was not giving enough time to my family. Women across the world have to multi-task, it was no different for me. I went ahead because for me it was a leap of faith. I guess that makes us good entrepreneurs. Soon success walked through my door.

PASSION

As cliché as it sounds, my work is genuinely my passion. I learn new things on the job, I seek new avenues for business.

HOBBY

I am a private person and I like reconnecting with self, music is actually my soul.

FITNESS MANTRA

I am not a fitness freak, but do my pilates twice a week. And stretching keeps you agile. Being vegan helps me burn fat easily.

YOUR VIEWPOINT ON SUCCESS

I believe true success comes when you can preserve your values and authenticity. We ensure quality in our business and that for me is the idea of success.

YOUR FAVOURITE PASTIME

Music keeps my soul calm.

WHOM DO YOU GO TO FOR ADVICE IN TIME OF NEED

My mentor, whatever the situation be, he is objective while giving me guidance.

YOUR STRENGTH

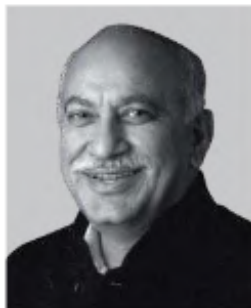
My daughters and the fact that one of them is working with IDFS gives me immense joy whilst the second one builds her career as a CA in England.

Kapoor started IDFS with the first inflight retail experience with Jet Airways and gradually expanded her wings to operate 40,000 sq. ft. of retail space in arrivals and departures at Delhi across all categories.

It was under her stewardship the company established their domestic retail wing with Koncept Retail Services in 2017-18.

Kapoor started IDFS with the first inflight retail experience with Jet Airways and gradually expanded her wings to operate 40,000 sq. ft. of retail space in arrivals and departures at Delhi across all categories.

and create a platform that provides both luxurious and quality products to its clientele. To have ventured into this untapped domain and make it profitable has been a very rewarding journey. Yes, I am happy that I



By MJ AKBAR

AMERICA SOUGHT THE IMPOSSIBLE, RUSSIA THE UNATTAINABLE

Is this the beginning of a new world order?



THE SUNSET OF Kabul has slipped into the twilight of Kyiv and the American era will fade into darkness if Washington crumbles before its next great challenge: a confrontation with China over Taiwan.

Just three decades ago, in 1990, after victory in the Cold War, Washington and its cheerleaders were confident that Pax Americana would hold as much sway over the 21st century as it had over the 20th. But by 2005 America had lost its way in Iraq and never found one in Syria, leaving space which Vladimir Putin quickly filled. In 2014, Barack Obama responded with weak indifference when Putin tested the waters of Europe by occupying Crimea, home of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, anchored at Sevastopol. Having established the new normal in Ukraine, Putin waited while his diplomats made appropriate declamations over the advance of NATO to the borders of Russia. In August 2021, he watched America literally flee from Afghanistan when even a perfunctory stand would have interrupted the Taliban advance. Putin chose his moment.

On the night of Thursday February 24, Ukraine's young President Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked, plaintively, why he had been abandoned by the West. A few days of war taught Zelenskyy more than he had learnt during a lifetime of peace. Ukraine was not abandoned when the Russian invasion began on three fronts in February. America abandoned Ukraine in the first week of December 2021, when its response to Russian mobilisation was nothing more than the threat of sanctions. President Joe Biden, like Barack Obama, sought creative language to disguise retreat.

Vladimir Putin is only as strong as Joe Biden is weak.

The fatal flaw in American strategy after the searing punishment it suffered in Iraq is the curious belief that it can preserve strategic space without boots on the ground. Putin's favourite quotation, it is believed, is a line from Lenin: "Probe with the bayonet—if you find mush, keep on probing." It is evident that the message Putin received from his bayonet was that the White House was now occupied by men of straw. The Russian leader must have been amused when Biden sent his prayers to Ukraine after Putin sent his troops.

Putin enjoys judo and plays chess. A kick makes its point but does not necessarily land a decisive blow. Chess is more complex: it teaches a player the vital difference between reach and overreach. The gulf in between can become a septic swamp. We will soon learn whether, in addition to Lenin, Putin has read the German philosopher-poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who wrote that wisdom lies in knowing when to stop.

In retrospect, both America and Russia, who have held the two ends of a bipolar world since 1945, became unhinged albeit in different ways after the collapse of the Soviet Union: neither was able to manage the consequences. Both now seem exhausted,



Photos AP

VLADIMIR PUTIN IS ONLY AS STRONG AS JOE BIDEN IS WEAK. PUTIN'S FAVOURITE QUOTATION, IT IS BELIEVED, IS A LINE FROM LENIN: 'PROBE WITH THE BAYONET— IF YOU FIND MUSH, KEEP ON PROBING.' IT IS EVIDENT THAT THE MESSAGE PUTIN RECEIVED FROM HIS BAYONET WAS THAT THE WHITE HOUSE WAS NOW OCCUPIED BY MEN OF STRAW. THE RUSSIAN LEADER MUST HAVE BEEN AMUSED WHEN BIDEN SENT HIS PRAYERS TO UKRAINE AFTER PUTIN SENT HIS TROOPS

bleeding from their own ambitions and miscalculations.

Such was the American euphoria in the 1990s that Washington lapsed into what might be called the Fukuyama Madness: history itself had come to an end with the fall of Soviet communism to the Pentagon-Wall Street-White House trident of liberalism. There were no more worlds left to conquer. Society had found perfection in the American model of governance and the spirit of its constitution. Francis Fukuyama, a professor at Stanford, wrote a much-bought book titled *The End of History and the Last Man*. The White House waved with Caesarean élan, and forgot an elementary lesson: an adversary is vanquished not when it is defeated, but when it accepts defeat. Russia found Vladimir Putin, who would not accept defeat, even when all around

him lay nothing but the debris of a once powerful idea.

America sought the impossible, Russia the unattainable. Washington could never become the permanent guardian, guarantor, governor, philosopher, and global policeman of the 21st century. Putin wanted the virtual return of the Soviet Union's zone of influence. That was impossible, not because of American obstruction but because the zone had changed in a very fundamental sense. The nations of the old Soviet Union had discovered the meaning of independence. After Ukraine, America's allies are finding out the limits of their dependence.

The crisis in Ukraine could initiate the restructuring of the present world order, for both the pillars of the 20th century have been undermined.

THE BIGGEST CASUALTY of the Ukraine war has been trust in Washington. America's allies have got the message. If a crisis arrives with the speed and strength of a hurricane, Joe Biden, hiding behind the porous veil of "strategic ambiguity", will rush out statements rather than missiles. The mighty Pentagon is now a bald Samson put out to pasture. Samson's story never ends well for the house, which comes crashing down in the final scene. It remains for those who have taken shelter in the house to rebuild the structure. They have no other option.

The first world leader to sound an unambiguous alarm was Japan's longest-serving Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who left office after eight years because of ill health. In the middle of the battle for Kyiv, Abe told Washington through a television interview to abandon "strategic ambiguity" over Taiwan and make a formal commitment to defend the island territory in case China invaded. He had more to suggest.

Abe added that Japan, the only country to suffer the horrific devastation of atomic bombs, must abandon nuclear pacifism and move towards "nuclear sharing", becoming part of some arrangement on the lines of NATO which permitted the presence of nuclear weapons on Japanese territory. His exact words were: "Japan is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has its three non-nuclear principles, but it should not treat as a taboo discussions on the reality of how the world is kept safe." Japan's security could no longer be outsourced to America. It needed its own finger on a nuclear button.

Shinzo Abe's prescription marks nothing less than the end of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime, which India never signed because it was arbitrary and discriminatory. Japan, incidentally, has sufficient fissile plutonium and expertise in

rocket technology to build a nuclear arsenal within a year.

Japan and Germany could take the diplomatic lead in developing a new consensus across the vacuum left by America and Russia, in cooperation with democracies like France and India. This will be a long process which must, at some point soon, revisit the now hollow shell of the United Nations (UN). They will certainly revitalise UN reform, always at the top of the diplomatic agenda of India, Germany and Japan. The present Security Council has long outlived its utility and become nothing more persuasive than a split lectern. Transition is a curious process: nothing happens and then suddenly everything happens.

This is a historic, and perhaps ironic, reversal, for Germany and Japan were smashed to smithereens by the American-Russian-Chinese alliance in World War II. Experience has taught Germany and Japan that fascism is suicidal, and domination is dead; the 21st century must see a shared world inching as best as it can, and perhaps only where it can, towards a liberal, democratic horizon. India will become a significant part of the new architecture for stability, for it is a democratic state with a liberal Constitution and a proven ability to defend its borders and preserve its values.

Order needs the protection of armour. Shinzo Abe was explicit; Germany prefers discretion, but Germany will militarise again after a long phase of strategic naïveté, which reached its apex under Chancellor Angela Merkel who ruled Germany for 16 years with a steely eye and a plastic fist. Her axe targeted the defence budget each time there was a financial crisis. The cuts were never restored.

The present chief of the German army, Alfons Mais, could



THE FIRST WORLD LEADER TO SOUND AN UNAMBIGUOUS ALARM WAS JAPAN'S LONGEST-SERVING PRIME MINISTER SHINZO ABE, WHO LEFT OFFICE AFTER EIGHT YEARS BECAUSE OF ILL HEALTH. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BATTLE FOR KYIV, ABE TOLD WASHINGTON TO ABANDON 'STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY' OVER TAIWAN AND MAKE A FORMAL COMMITMENT TO DEFEND THE ISLAND TERRITORY IN CASE CHINA INVADED



BOTH THE PILLARS OF THE 20TH CENTURY HAVE BEEN UNDERMINED. THE BIGGEST CASUALTY OF THE UKRAINE WAR HAS BEEN TRUST IN WASHINGTON. AMERICA'S ALLIES HAVE GOT THE MESSAGE. EUROPE WILL WAKE UP FROM ITS LONG POST-1945 COMA, INDUCED BY A PALLIATIVE CALLED THE AMERICAN SECURITY UMBRELLA

A Russian naval exercise off the Crimean coast on the Black Sea in September 2016

from Kyiv on NATO but its adventurism will have a debilitating effect on its long term goals. Moscow is not too worried about sanctions, since neither America nor Europe is ready to turn off the gas taps. The rise of oil prices from \$65 per barrel last December to over \$110 at the time of writing means that Russia has nearly doubled its daily profit. Moreover, we tend to forget that Russia is capable of an economic response. It has the largest reserves of C4F6 gas, is the world's biggest producer of titanium from the 'Titanium Valley' in western Siberia, and has a preponderant share of palladium reserves (palladium is used for sensors and computer memory). Putin knows that in 2018, the West brought sanctions against Russia's largest producer of aluminium with much fanfare and quietly dropped them when the price of the metal rose.

All through his career in Russian intelligence between 1975 and 1991, Putin had dealt with the West. The war was a serious miscalculation, but he knows that it will wind down

not contain his frustration after the invasion of Ukraine. He said: "The Bundeswehr, the army I'm privileged to lead, is more or less empty-handed. The options we can offer in support of the alliance (NATO) are extremely limited." He added for good measure: "I'm p****d off!" He can now look forward to better times. As markets crashed when the fighting began, shares of BAE Systems, builder of fighter jets and sophisticated weaponry, rose by 10 per cent. The true heavy lifters in the international defence bazaar will already be busy in board meetings. The market knows what it is doing.

Britain tries to cloak its weakness with bluster, but one fact will reveal the brittle truth: it has probably only about 200 battle-ready tanks left. It could not send enough mines to Ukraine because it did not have that many. Europe will wake up from its long post-1945 coma, induced by a palliative called the American security umbrella. Putin has ensured that defence budgets will rise across Europe. Having rebuilt its war-ravaged economy, the European Union will now have to build the force needed to protect its achievements.

Russia will have to recalibrate its options, adjusting them against reality. It will probably get the commitment it seeks

because America and Europe are not ready to fight for Ukraine the way they will for NATO members. Moreover, there are sages in the American establishment like Henry Kissinger who understand Moscow's concerns vis-à-vis Ukraine. But Putin will also realise that events have now escaped his reach.

If the outcome of every war went only along intended lines, history would be a different story. World War I began as a contest for Europe and ended in the collapse of three empires that had controlled Eurasia for six centuries. World War II began as another conflict between familiar belligerents but finished by dismantling colonialism in both the West and the East, making way for two new superpowers led by Washington and Moscow. Ukraine will not start a world war, but it has triggered worldwide ramifications.

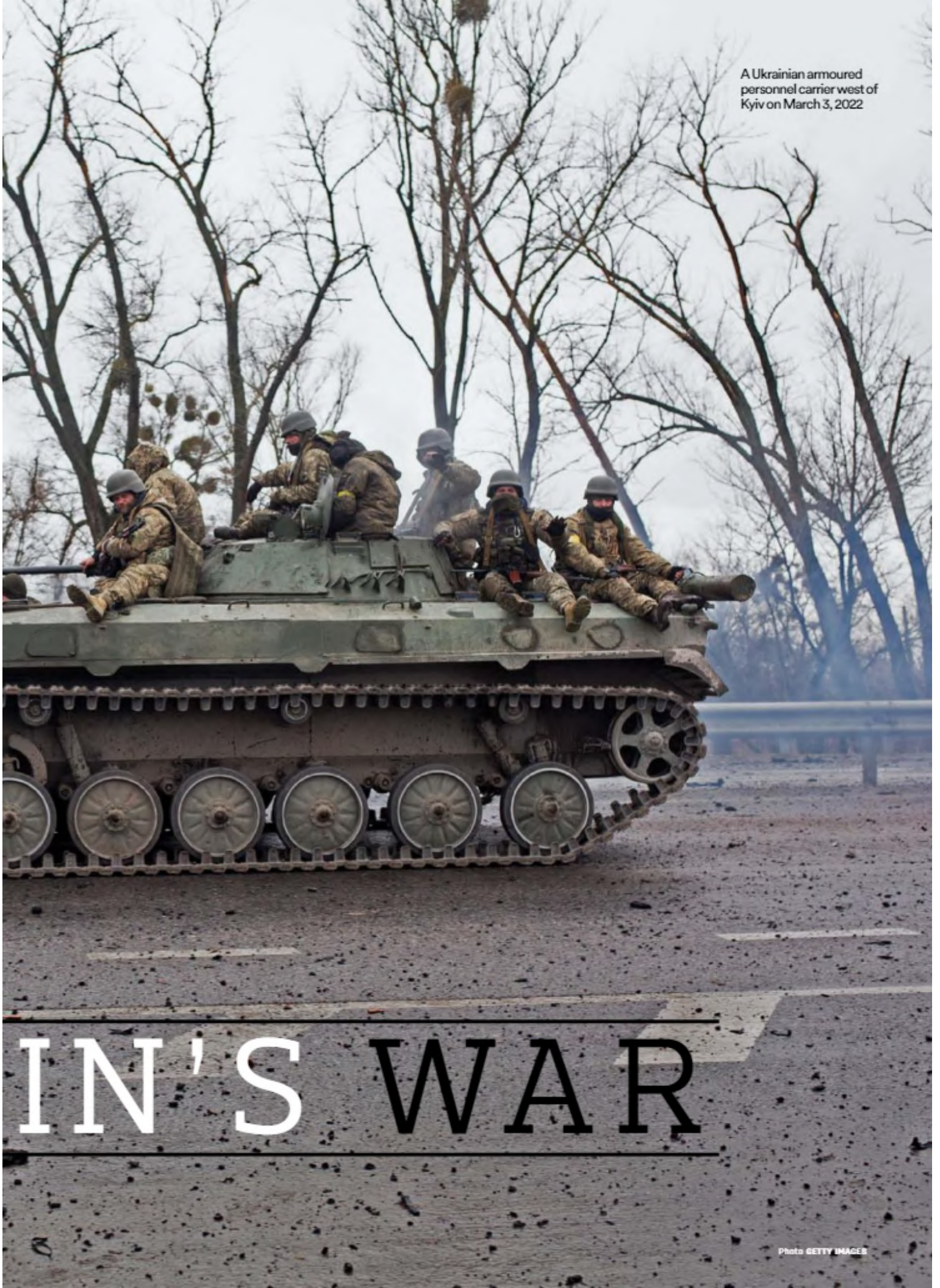
As the world swerves again, optimists can always invest in hope. ■

MJ Akbar is a member of Rajya Sabha and the author of several books, including Doolally Sahib and the Black Zamindar: Racism and Revenge in the British Raj



PUT

A Ukrainian armoured
personnel carrier west of
Kyiv on March 3, 2022



IN'S WAR

Photo GETTY IMAGES



THE NEW COLD WAR BEGINS

Joe Biden's Containment 2.0 seeks to employ economic tools to undermine the Russian state. The strategy could prove counterproductive and divide the global economy into two competitive blocs. It will also raise international tensions and worsen America's strategic overstretch

By **BRAHMA CHELLANEY**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions-centred reprisals of the US and its allies are a watershed moment in international relations. They mark the advent of a new Cold War whose ramifications will extend to every corner of the world.

The current crisis has the makings of a drawn-out and dangerous confrontation between Russia and the West, particularly the US-led NATO. The West essentially is snapping its post-Cold War ties with Moscow despite the risk of creating international strategic instability. The crisis is already affecting the global economy, with higher energy prices and supply-chain disruptions set to fuel inflation and slow economic growth.

US President Joe Biden has made it clear that the US has embarked on a strategy of Containment 2.0 against Moscow. Containment 2.0 may be modelled on the Cold War-era Containment 1.0, which ended with the Soviet Union's disintegration, but it seeks to employ largely economic tools to disrupt the Russian economy and undermine the Russian state.

Biden has called the West's punitive steps against Russia "the broadest sanctions in history." Biden has vowed to make Russia pay "dearly, economically and strategically", and to make Russian President Vladimir Putin a "pariah on the international stage".

Team Biden's narrative is that it has managed to globally isolate Russia. But other than in Europe and East Asia, US allies have refused to blindly follow the American lead. Take the Middle East: Israel and the Gulf oil sheikhdoms have taken a neutral or nuanced stand. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), like India, abstained from the February 25 vote at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on a US sponsored resolution deploring the Russian invasion as a violation of the UN Charter.

The 10-nation ASEAN, as underlined by its February 26 joint statement, has taken an independent stance. The US later persuaded Singapore to take some punitive steps against Moscow. Those



staying neutral include America's neighbour Mexico, US ally Philippines and several Latin American states, including Brazil.

Still, February 24, 2022—the day Russia attacked Ukraine—will go down in history as a turning point, heralding the start of a new Cold War. The economic warfare the US and its allies have launched against Russia is likely to trigger Russian reprisals.

The new Cold War's larger effects, meanwhile, are becoming visible. Germany, for example, has unveiled a remilitarisation plan, including boosting its military spending from 1.4 per cent to above 2 per cent of GDP. Its centre-left chancellor, Olaf Scholz, while contending that Russia's Ukraine invasion means "the world will not be the same as before", has announced an immediate investment of a whopping €100 billion in new weaponry, such as the American F-35 warplanes and Israeli drones.

As for Biden, whose approval rating at home had hit a new low, the Russian invasion has been a blessing in disguise politically. Now Biden is playing the "war card" to rally Americans behind him. Indeed, as his State of the Union address suggested, Biden

is hoping that the Russian invasion can turn the political tide in the US in his favour just as the 9/11 terrorist attacks did for then-President George W Bush.

In essence, Biden is using the Ukraine war and his harsh sanctions against Russia to change the narrative that he is an incompetent and unpopular president. He has framed the Russian invasion as a "battle between democracy and autocracy," telling the American nation that Putin has sought to "shake the foundations of the free world, thinking he could make it bend to his menacing ways." Never mind that Ukraine is no real democracy and that its comedian-turned-president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has shown himself to be no less autocratic than Putin.

Facts don't matter in Biden's alternative universe: having surrendered Afghanistan to the world's most brutal terrorists and having deserted Ukraine to its fate in an avoidable war by ruling out in advance that the US will fight with it against the Russians, Biden declared in his State of the Union address, "We have fought for freedom, expanded liberty, defeated totalitarianism and terror."



History will remember Biden for consigning Afghanistan to the dark age of terrorist rule. In fact, America's Afghanistan humiliation encouraged Putin to up the ante. Biden's Afghan blunder is also serving as a real shot in the arm for Islamic terrorist groups across the world.

As the history of this century alone illustrates, foreign military invasions have destabilised sovereign states. And as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan demonstrate, such invasions have triggered unending violence and bloodshed. Russia's invasion, and the US plan to arm Ukrainian resistance forces to bleed Russia, threaten to turn Ukraine into a Syria or Libya.

In this light, today's tragic and volatile moment could get worse without caution and prudence.

GENESIS OF THE CRISIS

In its own hemisphere, the US still enforces the 198-year-old Monroe Doctrine to ensure there is no unfriendly state in its extended backyard. In 1823, President James Monroe declared that the US "should consider any attempt" by foreign powers "to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety."

Since then, the US has regarded its hemisphere as its exclusive sphere of influence. It brought the world to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe in 1962 when it imposed a naval quarantine on Cuba to thwart Soviet plans to place missiles there. The Cuban Missile Crisis, as it became known, ended only after the Soviet Union, faced with the spectre of a global nuclear war, abandoned its plans.

In 2018, then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called the

Monroe Doctrine "as relevant today as it was the day it was written." And the following year, then-US National Security Advisor John Bolton said that the "Monroe Doctrine is alive and well."

Yet the US has expanded NATO to Russia's borders, including deploying forces in the Baltics where the Soviet Union had its largest forward military bases. Between 2014 and 2021, the US poured more than \$2.5 billion in arms and other military aid into Ukraine, which Moscow sees as part of its security perimeter. To protect its heartland, especially Moscow, Russia has historically relied on such a strategic buffer.

Believing the loss of the Baltic States to NATO had undermined Russian security, Putin drew a "red line" for the West with Ukraine. He started viewing the outcome of the standoff between Moscow and Washington over Ukraine as a contest Russia must win to shield its security.

As American Senator Rand Paul recently asked, "What do you think our response would be if Mexico were joining a military alliance with Russia against the United States? We would be hopping mad."

After the Cold War ended, the US could have brought Russia into the Western fold in the way it did with Germany and Japan after World War II. Russia should have been accommodated in the post-Cold War European security architecture, given that Russian security historically has been tied to Europe.

The US, however, shied away from seizing that historic opening. Instead, after its triumph in the Cold War, the US made a series of strategic moves to expand its perimeter of influence deep into Russia's near abroad.

AP

Destroyed Russian military vehicles in Bucha, near Kyiv, March 1, 2022



REUTERS

RUSSIA'S EJECTION FROM THE WESTERN-LED FINANCIAL SYSTEM WILL LIKELY SET IN MOTION THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES IMMUNE TO WEAPONISATION OF PAYMENTS SYSTEMS, BANKING, ETC, WHILE PROMPTING NON-WESTERN ECONOMIES TO DIVERSIFY THEIR CENTRAL-BANK RESERVES



A queue extending from an ATM cash machine in St Petersburg, February 27, 2022

NATO, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, became obsolete, yet the US retained it so that it could dominate European security. The US expanded NATO eastward by adding 14 new members, taking in the entire former Warsaw Pact and the three Baltic states, and then declaring that Ukraine and Georgia would become NATO members. Such expansionism increasingly grated Moscow, contributing eventually to Russia's remilitarisation.

Long before Putin became a major political force, Russia's US-friendly president, Boris Yeltsin, had said in late 1994 (in front of US President Bill Clinton and other heads of state gathered for a summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) that the "domineering" US was "trying to split" Europe again through NATO expansion. According to US declassified documents, Clinton speciously assured Yeltsin that any NATO enlargement would be slow, with no surprises, and done "in partnership" with Russia.

The list of Russian grievances subsequently went beyond NATO expansion to other unilateral American actions, including Washington's termination of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (which was of unlimited duration) and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

A number of eminent American thinkers had warned against NATO expansionism or ignoring Russian security concerns over Ukraine. Henry Kissinger, for example, said in 2014 that "Ukraine should not join NATO" but "should pursue a posture comparable to that of Finland," which "cooperates with the West in most fields but avoids institutional hostility toward Russia." George F Kennan, who became famous as the grand strategist who designed the Cold War era containment policy, warned that expanding NATO to Russia's borders was bound to become "the beginning of a new Cold War."

With Russia feeling increasingly threatened by an encroaching NATO, Putin made clear late last year that Russia would "conduct itself as the US would behave if offensive weapons were near the US." Yet his warning received little attention in the US media.

In Ukraine, Putin has sought to avert what the US created on India's borders from the 1950s—a hostile, militarised Pakistan, both by arming it and by making it a member of the then American-led SEATO and CENTO military alliances.

Three days before launching the invasion of Ukraine, Putin said, "The US and NATO have begun the shameless development of the territory of Ukraine as a theatre of military operations." What he was saying in effect was that Russia will not tolerate the creation of a "Pakistan" on its southwestern borders.

After Kabul fell to the Taliban, a weakened Biden sought to restore his credibility at home with a tougher Russia policy that left little room for compromise with Moscow. Last autumn's provocative US NATO military exercises near Russia's Black Sea coast incensed Moscow, foreshadowing the present crisis. Following the US NATO exercises, Kremlin massed large numbers of troops and equipment near the borders with Ukraine, signalling its readiness to use force if diplomacy fails.

STRATEGIC MISCALCULATIONS THAT LED TO THE CRISIS

The conflict over Ukraine has resulted from strategic miscalculations by both sides. Let us start with Russia.

Mounting a credible threat to use military force can often achieve an objective without the need to actually execute the threat. When Putin launched a major military buildup against Ukraine to compel the US to abandon its post-Cold War policy of NATO creep to Russia's borders, he woke up the world to the



dangers of NATO expansionism. Commentators even in the US began asking whether expanding NATO to Russia's borders and creating a hostile Russia was in American interest.

The Russian military buildup on Ukraine's borders kept the US on tenterhooks, with Biden warning for days on end that the invasion was about to start. Instead of sustaining the threat, Putin decided to execute the threat, even though controlling the outcome of a war once it is launched is virtually impossible. By launching the aggression, he has united the Western bloc against him and brought Russia's economy and standing under intense pressure.

It is ironic that Putin has invaded a country that, in the Russian view, is part of the historical heart of the Russian state. Indeed, Ukraine's capital Kyiv is supposedly the cradle of the Russian civilisation, which explains the period of Russian history known

as Kievan Rus'.

As for the US, several missteps by it precipitated the present conflict, including putting missiles and troops close to Russia's borders, hardening Ukraine's approach towards Moscow by pouring huge military aid into that country, sustaining an escalating sanctions policy against Russia and refusing to address Russian concerns over Ukraine.

Biden thought he could use the threat of greater sanctions to deter Russia from invading Ukraine. The problem with that approach was that the US, through overuse, had blunted the instrument of sanctions by repeatedly slapping sanctions on Russia since 2014, when Putin annexed Crimea. Indeed, after taking office last year, Biden imposed two rounds of sanctions on Russia. No wonder, despite dangling the threat of harsh new sanctions, Biden failed to deter Russia from invading Ukraine.

Biden's most important miscalculation was to rebuff Putin's demand for a US security guarantee that the US and NATO would not turn Ukraine into a frontline launchpad for attacks on Russia by deploying offensive weapons systems on Ukrainian soil. For over three months, Putin sought such a guarantee but his warnings that conflict was inevitable in the absence of such an assurance were ignored.

The irony is that an internally fractured, highly corrupt and increasingly authoritarian Ukraine has little chance of ever becoming a NATO member. Each existing NATO member must ratify the addition of a new member, with the process in the US requiring support from two-thirds of the Senate.

Yet Biden refused to rule out Ukraine's NATO membership or assuage Russia's concerns that the US intended to turn Ukraine into its cat's paw against Moscow. It is as if he and the American "deep state" wanted a new Cold War to begin.

Yet another irony stands out: In the run-up to the Russian invasion, Biden made clear that the US would provide military aid to Ukraine but not come to its direct defence against Russia. With the US and its NATO allies loath to send their sons and daughters to fight for Ukraine, Biden's strategic objective was never to defend that country's territorial sovereignty. Rather, his goal was to help contain Russia, including by ensnaring it in a military quagmire in Ukraine if it launched an invasion.

This explains the large quantities of arms Western intelligence agencies began funnelling to Ukrainian resistance forces as soon as the Russian invasion began.

The Biden plan is to engineer an Afghanistan 2.0 against Russia by replicating the success of the 1980s, when the largest covert operation in CIA's history used Pakistan as a conduit to dispatch trained and armed anti-Soviet jihadists to Afghanistan, culminating in the Soviet army's defeat there.

As part of the mission to similarly entrap Russia in a military quagmire in Ukraine, Biden responded to the Russian aggression by immediately instructing the release of \$350 million worth of weapons from US stocks for the Ukrainian resistance, on top of the more than \$650 million in such assistance that the US provided to Ukraine last year. Furthermore, he has asked Congress for a staggering \$6.4 billion more for such arms aid.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Joe Biden at the White House, September 01, 2021



BIDEN'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE WAS NEVER TO DEFEND UKRAINE'S TERRITORIAL SOVEREIGNTY. HIS GOAL WAS TO HELP CONTAIN RUSSIA, INCLUDING BY ENSNARING IT IN A MILITARY QUAGMIRE IF IT LAUNCHED AN INVASION. THIS EXPLAINS THE ARMS FUNNELLED TO UKRAINIAN RESISTANCE FORCES



Putin and Xi Jinping in Xiamen, September 3, 2017

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

THE LARGER IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORLD

Russia's virtual ejection from the Western-led financial system at a time when economic power has shifted East will likely set in motion the search for alternatives that are immune to weaponisation of payments systems (especially SWIFT), banking, trade finance and currencies, while prompting many non-Western economies to diversify their central bank reserves as an insurance. More countries will seek to do bilateral trade in their own currencies.

In other words, the economic war that the West has unleashed against Russia could eventually prove counterproductive to Western interests by spurring the creation of an alternate financial system and dividing the global economy into two competitive blocs.

Furthermore, as if to confirm Putin's long-held fears, the US-led response to the Ukraine invasion appears aimed at ultimately bringing about regime change in Moscow.

The raft of harsh sanctions imposed, however, leaves the West with little leverage over Russia. In power politics, outcomes, not intentions or objectives, matter most. The new sanctions are likely to only embolden Putin's belligerence.

The West has already fired virtually all the weapons it had in its arsenal of sanctions. The only thing left in its armoury is a possible trade embargo. Such an embargo will be difficult to enforce and could trigger a direct US-Russia war. A trade embargo will also be self-defeating, given Europe's reliance on Russian energy and the tight global energy supplies at present.

Russia is a military and nuclear superpower, as well as a cyber superpower. And it is certain to retaliate against the Western sanctions. Right now, Putin's primary focus is on achieving his basic war objectives in Ukraine.

It is too early to judge how Putin's invasion is going, as truth is the first casualty in the fog of war. But it is worth remembering that non-stop aerial bombardments for 42 days preceded America's 1991 ground attack on Iraq. And NATO's regime change military operation that turned Libya into a failed state lasted more than seven months.

Putin cannot afford to emerge as a loser from his Ukraine military opera-

tion, because that could unravel his power base at home.

Russia, the world's richest country in natural resources, has the capability to retaliate against the Western nations that have imposed sanctions of historic scale on it by reversing three decades of post-Cold War engagement. It can deliberately limit energy supplies to Europe and restrict export of some critical minerals that Western economies need. More significantly, Russia has the capability to take down or disrupt the Western digital infrastructure.

US foreign policy has long relied on sanctions, despite their uncertain effectiveness and unintended consequences. Sanctions imposed after Russia annexed Crimea created only a modest drag on Russia's economy but set in motion the China-Russia strategic alignment. The latest US-led sanctions will further deepen the China-Russia strategic entente and deliver a profits bonanza for China, which will become Russia's banker and secure greater Russian energy supplies, thus aiding the rapid expansion of Chinese economic power.

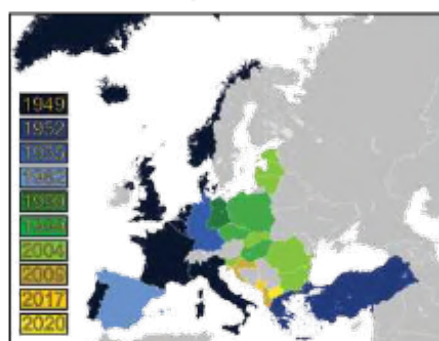
Russia is already the junior partner in the relationship with Beijing because of China's economic might. The new US-led sanctions against Russia will help China boost its status as the dominant partner and dictate the terms of the relationship with Moscow.

The sanctions also raise a larger question: Can Russia's invasion of a sovereign state in breach of the UN Charter justify Western reprisals in violation of international norms? It is open season on Russia and its people, with boycotts, cancellations and other repudiations extending from sport and culture to commerce. Switzerland has frozen bank accounts of all Russians.

Big Tech and other Western corporate behemoths have quickly aligned themselves with the US government to target Russia, including its media outlets.

More fundamentally, Biden's Containment 2.0 strategy against Russia is set to raise international tensions and volatility while also worsening America's strategic overstretch through greater entanglement in European security. This will likely sap US strength to deal with the bigger challenges in the Indo-Pacific and accelerate America's relative decline. ■

NATO's expansion since 1949



BELIEVING THE LOSS OF THE BALTIC STATES TO NATO HAD UNDERMINED RUSSIAN SECURITY, PUTIN DREW A 'RED LINE' FOR THE WEST WITH UKRAINE. HE STARTED VIEWING THE OUTCOME OF THE STANDOFF BETWEEN MOSCOW AND WASHINGTON OVER UKRAINE AS A CONTEST RUSSIA MUST WIN TO SHIELD ITS SECURITY



Brahma Chellaney is a geostrategist and the author of two award-winning books on water: Water, Peace, and War and Water: Asia's New Battleground



BORDERLAND OR BLOODLAND?

Geography as the determinant of Ukraine's violent history

By SUDEEP PAUL

Courtesy: Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center



Russian bombing in Kyiv striking the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, March 2, 2022; and the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial (inset)



Zakarpattia, the west-facing nose of Ukraine, borders four countries: Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Romania. In its hills, frontiers moved more often than people. A man named András Orosz had lived in the village of Novoye Selo, called Tiszaujhely in Hungarian. Over the course of his long life he had held five different nationalities: Austro-Hungarian, Romanian, Czechoslovak, Soviet and, finally, Ukrainian. Yet Orosz had never once left his village; the borders had moved around him.
—Rory MacLean, *Pravda Ha Ha*

HAD THE CRITICAL perspective of two Niko-lais—the editor Polevoy, whose *History of the Russian People* saw in Russia an elemental struggle between Europe and Asia, and Nadezhdin, Russia's first ethnographer—prevailed, Nikolai Gogol might still be considered a Ukrainian writer. But by the mid-1830s, before the 1836 performance of *The Government Inspector* in St Petersburg, Gogol had already been recast as a Russian writer thanks to the ill-tempered 'nationalist' poet-historian Stepan Shevryyov and Vissarion Belinsky, who in many ways had made the poet Nikolay Nekrasov before evading the Tsar's police by dying of tuberculosis. Gogol, of Ukrainian Cossack stock, still divides Russia and Ukraine over who gets to claim him.

A century before Gogol's birth (1809) and almost a half-century before Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* (*The Spirit of Law*, 1748, trans 1750), the Hetman of Ukraine, Pylyp Orlyk, wrote a constitution (the Constitution of Bendery, also known as Pacts and Constitutions of Rights and Freedoms of the Zaporizhian Host) that separated powers among the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. The Hetman's document also provided for a democratically elected Cossack parliament. Most of present-day Ukraine was still in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and almost 60 years after Pylyp Orlyk's constitution, the Koliivshchyna rebellion of the Cossacks in 1768 would culminate in the Massacre of Uman in which about 2,000 (once said to be more than 30,000) Poles and Jews as well as Uniate (Eastern Catholic) clergymen were killed.

The name of Ukraine, famously, is supposed to mean "borderland", tracing its Slavic roots back through Kievan Rus'. Notwithstanding etymological nuances, borderland it has always been. Driving from today's Chernivtsi in western Ukraine and thinking of the "Jews in kaftans...spur-jingling Romanian soldiers...colourfully dressed peasant women with baskets of eggs on their heads and solid ethnic German burghers in wide knickerbockers and Tyrolean hats" recalled in Gregor von Rezzori's autobiographical *The Snows of Yesteryear* (1989), historian and travel writer Rory Maclean writes: "To the Jews the city had been תשעראוויץ [Cher-

nivtsi in Yiddish]. Its Romanian rulers had called it Cernăuți. Under the Austrians it had been Czernowitz. To Poles it was Czerniowce and to Russians Chernovtsy. Once it had been dubbed 'Little Vienna' and 'Jerusalem upon the Prut'. But in the fury of the Second World War, its diverse culture had been ravaged and expunged." (*Pravda Ha Ha: True Travels to the End of Europe*, 2019)

Between them, the two World Wars destroyed Central Europe and its ethno-religious diversity of culture, imposing the new homogenous nation-state on the map. But nowhere did this history of violence play out in more sanguinary ferocity than in what historian Timothy Snyder calls the "bloodlands", straddling the old Central and post-1922 (Soviet Union) Eastern Europe: "In the middle of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered some fourteen million people. The place where all of the victims died, the bloodlands, extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States... Though their homelands became battlefields midway through this period, these people were all victims of murderous policy rather than casualties of war. The Second World War was the most lethal conflict in history, and about half of the soldiers who perished on all of its battlefields all the world over died here... in the bloodlands. Yet not a single one of the fourteen million murdered was a soldier on active duty. Most were women, children, and the aged; none were bearing weapons; many had been stripped of their possessions, including their clothes." (*Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, 2010)

UKRAINE IS THE GEOGRAPHY OF RUSSIAN PARANOIA. RUSSIA'S MORE SYSTEMATIC RISE AND EXPANSION UNDER THE ROMANOVS FED ON THE INSECURITY THAT HAD DRIVEN IVAN AND MEDIEVAL MUSCOVY. THIS INSECURITY OF A PREEMINENT LAND POWER REMAINS EXACTLY AS THE SOVIET UNION LIVED IT, AND AS POST-SOVIET RUSSIA STILL EXPLOITS IT

The bloodlands were where most of European Jewry perished because they mostly lived there. The Nazis did not kill in their concentration camps on German territory but in the extermination camps, the cities and fields in and around the bloodlands. Ukraine till 1945 was still without today's western territories but its contribution to this history of blood is as much pre-World War II as in its durée. It was here that the Terror-Famine, or Holodomor, killed four to seven million (as per more updated estimates since the 2003 UN figure of seven to 10 million deaths) people in 1932-33, as part of Stalin's policy-driven genocide of Ukrainians by starvation. Unlike the rest of the Depression-era Western world, most of those who died of hunger in Soviet Ukraine were peasants.

"The Ukrainian cities lived, just, but the Ukrainian countryside was dying. City dwellers could not fail to notice the destitution of peasants who, contrary to all seeming logic, left the field in search of food. The train station at Dnipropetrovsk was overrun with starving peasants, too weak to even beg," writes Snyder, after the Welsh journalist Gareth Jones. "The proof was all around. Starving peasants begged along the breadlines, asking for crumbs. In one town, a fifteen-year-old girl begged her way to the front of the line, only to be beaten to death by the shopkeeper. The city housewives making the queues had to watch as peasant women starved to death on the side-walks. A girl walking to and from school each day saw the dying in the morning and the dead in the afternoon." Some of the more gruesome scenes witnessed by Jones were in the city of Stalino, then newly renamed after the dictator. More recently, it has been an epicentre of the separatist-triggered civil war in Ukraine. The city is today's Donetsk.

Ukraine's mass starvation was a direct consequence of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan. The Ukrainians, eyewitnesses to their own catastrophe, would call it the "buds of the socialist spring."

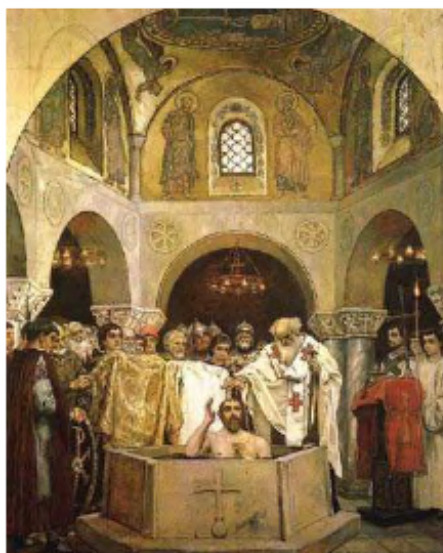
THE VIOLENCE INTRINSIC to Ukraine's political geography and ethnogeography cannot be imaginatively understood without Gogol's *Taras Bulba* (1835, a more popular second edition was published in 1842). The land where Scythian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Viking histories overlapped began its imperial life as Kievan Rus' on which foundation is based the shared origin of modern Russia and Ukraine, the East Slavic tribe of Polianians (or Polans) bequeathing the name Rus, having lived along the Ros, Rosava and Dnipro (Dnieper) and calling one of its dominant clans Ros. Once the most powerful state in medieval

Europe, Kievan Rus' saw its golden age begin with the ascent of Volodymyr I, or Vladimir the Great, around 980 CE and saw itself disintegrate a little more than a century after Vladimir's death in 1015.

Till the establishment of the Cossack Hetmanate in 1648, Ukraine would not get a semblance of sovereignty back—and even then, Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Hetman of the Zaporozhian Host, could lead his rebellion against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth only after pledging loyalty to the Russian tsar. Four centuries before that, the Mongol invasion that destroyed Kievan Rus' had razed Kyiv to the ground in 1240. And as recently as the late 16th century, the Crimean Khanate had marched to Moscow through Ukraine and plundered the city. With fear of the Golden Horde ingrained in the Russo-Ukrainian psyche, the persistent Tatar raids as well as the thriving Crimean Tatar slave trade meant the borderlands never knew a decade of peace. Divided along religious lines—the Poles and Lithuanians had converted some of the west Ukrainian nobility to Catholicism while eastern Ukraine and the peasants remained Orthodox, fuelling the Koliivshchyna rebellion—Ukraine would not regain its promised autonomy even after the tsarist empire conquered Crimea in 1783 and began settling the steppes north of Crimea (Novorossiya).

Taras Bulba, redolent of Russian-Ukrainian anti-Semitism which was shared by Gogol, as was the hatred for the Poles, captures the soul of the steppes, a topography and geography of unredeemable violence with no natural borders and of constant human conflict. It was here, in southern Ukraine, that Gogol believed the key to Russia lay. Behind a father ordering the execution of his son who had betrayed the Cossack cause because of his love for a Polish girl whose suffering in the Cossacks' siege had aroused his humanity stands this broader story of the borderland as an

Pyotr Sokolov's illustration for Nikolai Gogol's *Taras Bulba* (left); and Viktor Vasnetsov's fresco of the baptism of Vladimir (988 CE) in Kyiv's St Volodymyr Cathedral





THE BLOODLANDS WERE WHERE MOST OF EUROPEAN JEWRY PERISHED BECAUSE THEY MOSTLY LIVED THERE. IT WAS HERE THAT THE TERROR-FAMINE, OR HOLODOMOR, KILLED FOUR TO SEVEN MILLION PEOPLE IN 1932-33, AS PART OF STALIN'S POLICY-DRIVEN GENOCIDE OF UKRAINIANS. THE UKRAINIANS WOULD CALL IT THE 'BUDS OF THE SOCIALIST SPRING'

eternal bloodland.

But there is more to this geography which brings us to Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. In his pre dawn TV address of February 24, Putin said that Russia could not feel "safe, develop and exist" because of the "constant threat" from Ukraine. This long running grouse of every Russian strongman (and one woman who too had invaded Crimea) sounds as medieval as its origins, only the reality of it having transformed itself into paranoia. Peter the Great made Russia European. But that was not enough. The Russian predicament has been summed up by Robert D Kaplan in one paragraph: "...Russia, protected by forest glades against many a rampaging host, nevertheless fell prey in the thirteenth century to the Golden Horde of the Mongols. Thus would Russia be denied access to the European Renaissance, and branded forever with the bitterest feelings of inferiority and insecurity. The ultimate land-based empire, with no natural barriers against invasion save for the forest itself, Russia would know forevermore what it was like to be brutally conquered, and as a result would become perennially obsessed with expanding and holding territory, or at least dominating its contiguous shadow zones." (*The Revenge of Geography*, 2012)

That neat, albeit rather simplistic, summary of Russian imperial history ties in with Kievan Rus' constantly struggling against the nomads from the steppes and eventually being destroyed by the Mongols. "The result was that, through innumerable movements and counter-movements... Russian history shifted gradually north... with Moscow emerging strongest in the later medieval centuries," writes Kaplan. Medieval Muscovy was still landlocked and hemmed in by the taiga, the steppes and the Mongols to the

east. Its access to the Black Sea was denied by the Turks and Mongols on the southern steppes while the Poles, Lithuanians and Swedes blocked Moscow's access to the Baltic Sea. The White Sea to the north was unusable except for a brief period in summer. "Threatened on all sides of the infinite plain, the Russians had no choice but to try to break out, which they did under Ivan IV [Ivan the Terrible]." Russia's more systematic rise and expansion under the Romanovs, too, fed on the insecurity that had driven Ivan and medieval Muscovy. This classic dilemma and paranoia of a preeminent land power remains, in its essence, exactly as Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder understood it, as the Soviet Union lived it, and as post Soviet Russia still exploits it.

Ukraine, unfortunately, is the geography of Russian paranoia, or the excuse for it, even though the expansion of NATO or the European Union isn't exactly the Golden Horde sweeping across the steppes or the Wehrmacht rolling in. The comedian-turned war president in Kyiv has surprised the world with his courage, dignity and determination. Born to Russian-speaking Jewish parents, Volodymyr Zelenskyy (who, ironically, shares his forename with Vladimir of Kievan Rus' along with Putin) lost family in the Holocaust. To call him a Nazi is a crime in itself. As British journalist Ben Judah tweeted: "If you'd told many of our great-grandparents in the Pale that a Jewish man would be a Ukrainian war leader against a Russian invasion they would have blinked incredulously." Meanwhile, his hunter has dropped a bomb near the site of the Holocaust memorial at Babyn (Babi) Yar.

Condemned by another's sense of bad geography, Ukraine would hope to not retrace the socio-psychological leap it has taken in recent years. ■



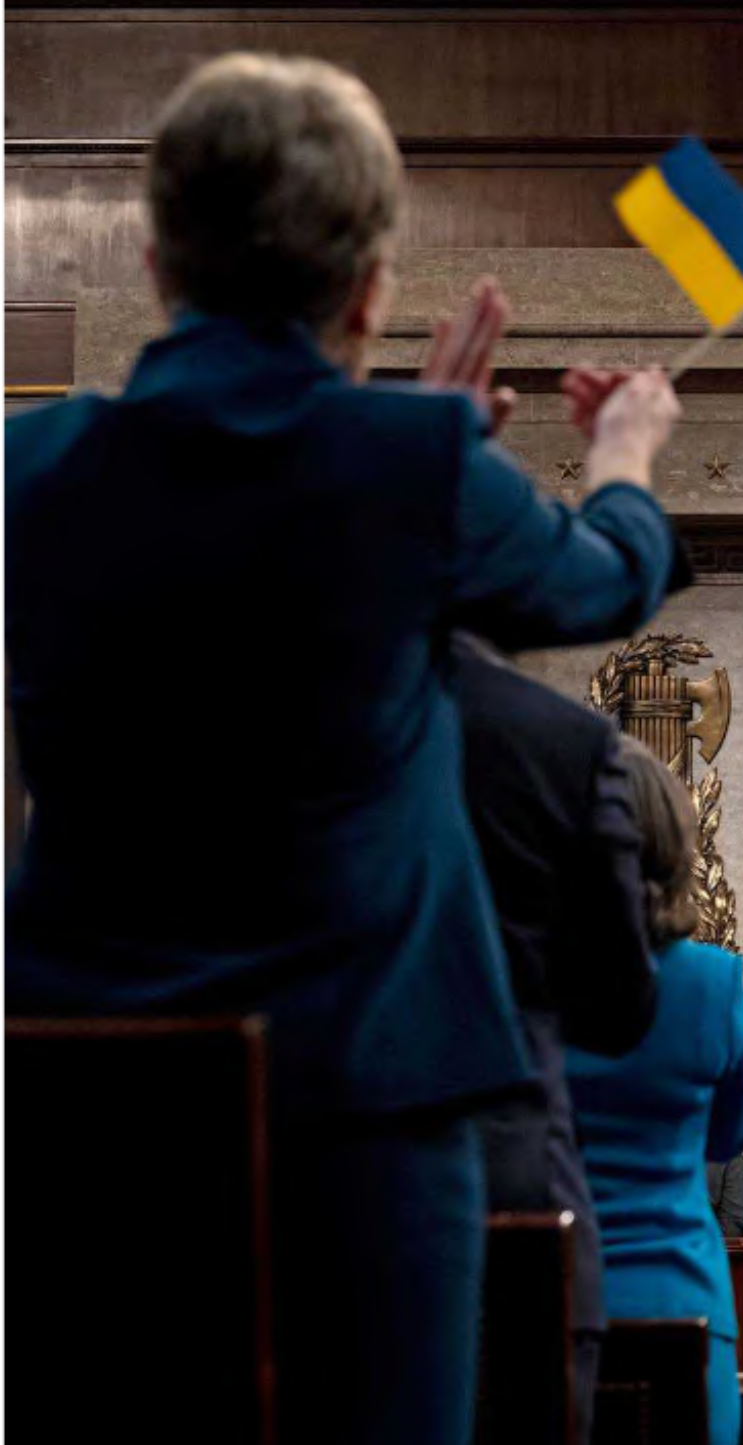
HOW PUTIN HAS UNITED AMERICA

Joe Biden is playing a convincing role in the crisis—for scant political reward

By JAMES ASTILL
in Washington DC

IT SEEMS unlikely that Donald Trump believes in karma. But if he did, the former president would have to acknowledge that the fates have passed a crushing verdict on his attempt to shake down Volodymyr Zelenskyy, shortly after he became Ukraine's president in May 2019. Indeed, almost everyone Trump sought to denigrate through that nefarious scheme has been richly vindicated; and everyone he sought to advance—including mainly himself—has been tarnished.

In the light of current events in Ukraine, it may be worth rehearsing the details of Trump's attempted shakedown. With his re-election battle looming, he had planned a muckraking campaign against his probable opponent, Joe Biden. The Democratic veteran's son, Hunter Biden, had once sat on the board of a Ukrainian energy



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company. And Trump and his cronies were convinced that Biden Junior had been involved in corruption at the firm; or at least that they could convince American voters that he had been.

In a call with Zelenskyy, a former comedian who once provided the Ukrainian voiceover of Paddington Bear, Trump attempted to recruit him to his scheme. Zelenskyy was hoping to secure an Oval Office meeting with Trump and more American weapons to counter a Russian-backed insurgency in eastern Ukraine. But Trump cut him off and asked that Zelenskyy “do us a favour” by looking into “Biden’s son”. The Ukrainian, wary of putting himself in the middle of a domestic American row, could not promise that. So Trump retaliated by withholding \$400 million of Congress-mandated military aid to Ukraine.

This led to the Republican president's first impeachment trial,



Joe Biden delivers the
State of the Union address
on March 1, 2022

after the details of Trump's shakedown effort—his “perfect call”, he called it—were leaked. And though he was saved by the partisan loyalty of most Republican senators, Trump suffered the indignity of having his plot publicised in embarrassing detail. This convinced Mitt Romney, a principled conservative senator from Utah, to vote to impeach and remove him from office. “Corrupting an election to keep oneself in office is perhaps the most abusive and destructive violation of one’s oath of office that I can imagine,” he said.

Trump’s vengeful supporters were so outraged that they have ever since been rubbishing Zelenskyy and his besieged country. Last month, Tucker Carlson, a pro-Trump blowhard on Fox News, said that, if forced to choose between Russia and Ukraine, he would plump for the former. He called Ukraine a “pure client

state of the United States State Department.”

The war that has since erupted in Ukraine is, of course, much more than a moral verdict on American politics. But from a navel-gazing American viewpoint, the symmetry between the disaster in far-off Ukraine and the domestic politics that has played a small part in it is hard to ignore.

The Russian leader that Trump spent four years as president fawning over is now indiscriminately shelling Ukrainian cities, a war crime, which is estimated to have killed at least hundreds of civilians so far. There will be no more room for Putin apologism now. Zelenskyy, resolutely rallying Ukraine’s defences from a bunker in Kyiv, has meanwhile been embraced across the West and beyond as a global hero of democracy.

Biden has won lesser yet notable plaudits, having for months



Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in New York, September 25, 2019

accurately predicted Putin's aggression and helped rally Ukraine—including with weapon supplies—against it. Romney, still a rare voice of moral courage among American conservatives, this week praised the Democratic president's diplomatic efforts almost as fulsomely as he had damned Trump's.

Cheerleaders for Trump's pro-Putin and isolationist views are meanwhile being marginalised, silenced, or are turning tail. Carlson, on second thought, is now much less keen on Russia. "I don't think anybody approves of what Putin did," he said, as the bombs began to fall on Kyiv and Kharkiv. "I certainly don't."

This could end up being of great political consequence. Opinion among Republican voters, which warmed considerably towards Putin under Trump's leadership, has also swung sharply. Republicans are now almost as anti-Putin and pro-Ukraine as Democrats are. They also tend to back Biden's policies in response to the crisis—which include stiff sanctions on Russia, military supplies for Ukraine and a promise that no American troops will be sent to join the fight. It is a long time since Americans have looked so united on any issue; or Trump so marginal.

HOW MUCH OF a role he played in emboldening Biden and weakening Zelenskyy is debatable. Yet it is worth underlining how good it is for Ukraine, Europe and the rules-based international order that Trump is no longer president. Especially as the crisis appears to be bringing out the best in his successor.

This septuagenarian Democratic president has had a tough time

in the job he spent decades pursuing. Indecisive and prone to inarticulacy, he never looked like a compelling presidential candidate until the alternative was Trump. And the crisis he inherited, wrought by Covid-19 and the economic shocks it has caused, perhaps doomed his presidency from the start. He is now as unpopular as Trump was. Yet the quiet competence of his administration, staffed by discreet professionals, is incomparable to the White House circus Trump ran. And the Ukraine crisis has shown its qualities at their best.

Having concluded way back in October that Putin was intent on a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the administration began arranging its own counter-measures early. They were never going to involve direct military action. The administration mainly set about alerting its fellow NATO members, helping to reorganise their military defence and pre-emptively designing sanctions that could be slapped on Russia. It did so, most intriguingly, with an extremely bold use of intelligence.

This involved circulating US intelligence reports on Putin's designs on Ukraine as swiftly and widely as possible. In November, America and its British allies released details of what they alleged was a Russian plot to topple Zelenskyy's government. They then publicised an even more elaborate Russian scheme to engineer a pretext for invading eastern Ukraine by means of a "very graphic propaganda video" purporting to show attacks by Ukrainian troops that would have included "corpses and actors who would be depicting mourners."

This was as risky as it was novel. Had Putin been planning no more than a series of training exercises on Ukraine's border, as

he claimed he was, America would have looked hysterical and unreliable. No doubt, its intelligence agencies made that point forcefully. Spooks hate to risk publicising their methods with their intelligence. Yet the administration's transparency paid off. The seriousness of America's warnings persuaded even reluctant NATO allies such as Germany to start shipping supplies to the Ukrainians and planning sanctions. They also helped force Russia onto the back foot. American spooks picked up intercepts of Russian officers complaining that their schemes kept being broadcast by the Americans—and they publicised this too.

BY THE TIME Putin was ready to launch his invasion last month, the US-led NATO alliance looked as united as it had been for many years. The disunity wrought by Biden's disorderly retreat from Afghanistan appeared to be forgotten. And Putin's bad faith had been so amply established by the intelligence-based messaging that he gave up on even bothering to suggest a pretext for his invasion. (Unless, that is, his deranged claim to have invaded in order to root out drug-addled Nazis counts as one.)

As soon as the shooting started in earnest, America's and its allies' efforts shifted to punishing the Russian economy. And again this effort has been more vigorous and effective than expected. To avoid major disruption to their own economies, which were already beset by high inflation, the Western powers elected not to sanction Russian energy exports. But instead of allowing this inevitably controversial decision to become a talking point, they meanwhile slapped extremely aggressive sanctions on Russia's financial sector—to the extent of freezing a large part of its central bank's foreign exchange reserves.

The effect of this on the Russian economy is already disastrous. The ruble lost 40 per cent of its value overnight. Around half of the central bank's foreign exchange reserves has been frozen. Banks are seeing half-mile queues for cash as panic on Russian high streets sets in.

The Europeans are also targeting the richest Russians—the so-called 'oligarchs' who seized the heights of the old state-owned economy in the 1990s. Roman Abramovich, the Ukrainian-born billionaire who has owned Chelsea Football Club for two decades, has put it up for sale. He apparently wants to cash out of the club rather than run a risk of his great wealth being confiscated. On March 2, police in Hamburg seized a yacht, reportedly the world's biggest by tonnage, belonging to the oligarch Alisher Usmanov (a former part-owner of Arsenal Football Club). Satellite imagery, rather hilariously, suggests another five oligarch-owned yachts have congregated around the Maldives, which does not have an extradition treaty with America.

Economic sanctions can be useful tools. Yet they are essentially a defensive measure, of questionable effectiveness in changing an opponent's policy aims. The war will be decided chiefly by the Russians and Ukrainians themselves—albeit with a constant risk of NATO being drawn

ever deeper into it. The nuclear sabre-rattling Putin has already indulged in—by moving Russia's strategic threat to its highest state of readiness—shows how dangerous that could be.

The Biden administration recognises this. It has batted back any suggestion that it might enforce even a limited no-fly zone over Ukraine. Unlike the badly led British government, it has also sensibly resisted talk of trying Putin for war crimes. The urgent priority is to persuade him to end the war; such talk can only make that harder.

For America, the strategic repercussions of Putin's war could be profound. America's national security strategy envisages the country locked in a great-power competition with Russia and China. Yet its military planners no longer allow for a possibility that it might have to fight two major wars in different theatres. Putin's war, the most serious act of Russian revisionism since the collapse of the Soviet Union, seems likely to spark calls for additional military spending and contingency planning to revise that.

The war's political fallout in America may be harder to predict. Most Americans tend not to care much about foreign policy—but when they do care, as during World War II, the Vietnam War and in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, big political shifts may follow.

This war is most unlikely to rise to that level. Yet the modicum of unity and shift away from Trump that it has already elicited could be significant. In theory, it should give Biden an opportunity to restore his popularity. That could in turn diminish the prospects of the president's party losing control of Congress at the mid-terms in November.

Such a recovery is clearly possible. In their first flush of admiration for Zelenskyy's heroism, American and European voters have signalled their recently dormant appreciation for a moral and righteous cause. And Biden, as Romney articulated rather better than the president can, has put himself on the right side of it in this crisis. The question is whether any other Republicans will give him credit for that.

They so far have not. To the contrary, most Republican policymakers blame the Democratic president for the crisis, even as they call for essentially his policies. "If Donald Trump was president none of this crap would be going on," said Senator Lindsey Graham, a pocket-sized Trump fanboy. "Biden is weak and Trump was strong." It is a ludicrous argument, plainly intended to curry favour with the former president and excuse Graham's role in voting to exonerate Trump for coercing Zelenskyy. Yet such liberal-bashing is also tremendously popular with Republican voters. They are also minded to give Biden little or no credit for his diplomatic efforts in this crisis.

The country has rarely broached a major foreign policy crisis in such a politically divided state. It makes it hard to see how Biden can reap much political benefit from the crisis. That would be unjust. It probably also makes it even likelier that Trump, who

has all but promised to run against him again in 2024, will do so and win. In that case, all bets on America's posture towards Russia and Ukraine would be off. And Putin's prospects of controlling both would rise. ■



James Astill is the Washington bureau chief and Lexington columnist for The Economist. He is a contributor to Open



INTERVIEW SVYATOSLAV VAKARCHUK, Musician

'KYIV NOW FIGHTS FOR THE FUTURE OF ALL HUMAN BEINGS'



AP

On the day Russia declared war on Ukraine, the country's biggest rock star, Svyatoslav 'Slava' Vakarchuk got on to Kyiv's glass bridge in a show of solidarity. As people gathered around him, singing along, Slava said that the people of Ukraine were together and "We shall overcome."

Slava, lead singer of the band Okean Elzy, was at the forefront of the Maidan Movement, which he calls "Ukraine's revolution for dignity". In May 2019, Slava launched his own party, Holos (Voice). He was expected to run for president but chose to bow out. His party, though, won 20 of 423 seats in the parliamentary elections two months later. A year later, Slava also quit as an MP, declaring that his "mission was accomplished". But, as Melinda Haring of the Atlantic Council wrote, "He may have created the first real political party based on ideology, not personality, and one without a direct financial relationship to Ukraine's oligarchs."

Slava spoke to RAHUL PANDITA from somewhere on the outskirts of Kyiv—both of them were in the 2015 class of the Yale World Fellowship Program. Slava's internet connection was breaking, but he managed to speak. This interview, recorded on the third day of Russia's invasion, has been edited for clarity.

Would you describe what is happening in Kyiv right now?

What can you see, and what are your feelings about it?

I am speaking to you from the outskirts of Kyiv. I have been working as a truck driver, bringing children and women to safety, going back and forth. Sometimes, I bring back gasoline and give it to people who need it. It is a very difficult time. You don't sleep at all. You sleep probably for two hours. It's like you are in a nightmare, you are on a rollercoaster. Kyiv now fights for the future of all human beings. We are not only fighting for our freedom but for the freedom of the whole of humanity, including those places and countries who think it is not about them.

What Putin did has ruined all the rules, margins and boundaries that existed since 1945. It has started a whole new big world war... in the middle of Europe. In the last seven years there have been conflicts... a lot of blood and unjust things. But this one is the most horrific; this is 100 per cent cynicism because the country which guaranteed our freedom and safety has violated them cynically.

There never was any big gap between the two nations. Look, these are our brothers; they are almost like our people. And now they are killing their brothers. The world needs to know that. Not only that, together we need to stop it. I am getting emotional, but I know they are killing people... elderly people, children... just two hours ago, there was a rocket attack on a big residential house. And there was no military object around. There are so many victims; we don't know how many. And it infuriates you.

You supported the Orange Revolution and were also at the forefront of the Maidan Movement in 2013-14. What is the sense you are getting from your fellow countrymen? Did they anticipate that, apart from fighting the proxies put up by Moscow, they would also have to battle Russian tanks? The majority of the population was not ready, mentally, to fight those who claimed to be our brothers. But it quickly changed. A day before, in the morning—and it seems like it was a month ago—I

woke up with a huge blast five miles from where I live. And I heard something like this for the first time in my life. I had heard such sounds only in battle movies earlier. It was not like a bullet being fired, it was a big rocket launcher. And it gives you goosebumps in a bad way. It made me shiver. Because you realise that had it hit your place, maybe nothing would have survived. And then you see these shells around when you drive. And it is a surreal feeling... is it really happening to you! Is this happening in the 21st century? In the middle of Europe! The continent which seemed most peaceful... is this nightmare coming from somebody who says he is your brother? Till the "revolution of dignity" in Ukraine and till Russia took over Crimea and imposed their war in Donbas, our band was not only very popular in Russia but we also toured there a lot. We probably went to all big places in Russia. And millions of people came and streamed our music, and now the leadership which represents those people is committing serious crimes. The whole nation of Russia should stand against this—at least those who listen to our music and are our fans. We know some of them are going to [anti-war] demonstrations [in Russia], but we need more. I know this sounds idealistic but it is in the hands of Russian citizens to stop this.

But if they do nothing, we will resist. Some people are fighting—we have a big territorial army. They have courage and are ready to do whatever is needed.

Are you disappointed by the weak response of powerful countries in the West so far?

I do not want to get into weak or strong. But I want to tell them: Act now, before it is too late. Do anything, do strong things. You can send more weapons to Ukraine. You can impose sanctions on Russia. Do not hesitate to do it. It will be late tomorrow. The stronger the response now, the easier it will be to stop Russia. Ukraine is doing its best to resist. Today is the third day and Kyiv stands absolutely tall and strong. And there is no sign that the enemy is going to succeed. But still, the force they [Russia] are going to put into this war is very big. So we need to stand against it and we need international help. By the way, India is a very big country and very important voice at the United Nations. Even if the Security Council is locked by Russia, again one thing which infuriates me, all countries can raise their voice and condemn Russia's actions... including India.

I love your country, I love your culture. I have been to your country. I am a big fan of the cuisine, I do yoga. For me, India is one of the greatest places. But you have to do something. In coming years you will see consequences of that—either your action or inaction.

There are many in Ukraine who want you to be in politics, become the president. But you have been a reluctant politician. Does this war change that reluctance in any way?

You know I am an artist. My voice is louder than most. So I need to do this. I have played my music all over. It is the soundtrack of resistance. For me, it speaks to my people. And I will do whatever it takes to inspire my people. I will certainly do whatever it takes to fight alongside them. But I think my voice as a social figure, as a musician, as someone who has influence over the young people, is the most important thing I can give my country. ■



INDIA ON A TIGHT

New Delhi balances ties with Russia and the West while keeping

By **RAJEEV DESHPANDE**



ROPE

an eye on China



Indian citizens, mostly students, stranded in Ukraine arrive at Hindon Air Base in Ghaziabad on an IAF flight, March 3, 2022

BETTY IMAGES

NOT UNLIKE THE American exit from Afghanistan, Russia's invasion of Ukraine unfolded much like a prophecy foretold. But when it happened, complex variables meant India had to deal with multiple scenarios which include balancing ties with a key defence partner, censuring violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, and not losing sight of India's main security concern: an armed face-off with China in the eastern Himalayas that will soon complete two years.

As the Russian military attacked Ukraine on February 24, the Indian foreign office faced two related but different sets of problems. On the one hand, there was an inevitable vote at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) that needed deft footwork, and on the other was the task of repatriating some 18,000 Indian students. While the policy front was challenging enough, it was the plight of the students that was more immediate in terms of domestic concerns in the midst of elections in Uttar Pradesh closely tied to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) national fortunes.

This was the third time in the last two years that India has had to organise a major airlift of its citizens from international crises zones. After the Covid pandemic burst on the world, Indian students (many studying medicine just as in Ukraine) were brought back from China, and later Vande Bharat flights ferried many more from other destinations. *Operation Devi Shakti* brought back Indians and even Afghans from Afghanistan after Taliban took over the country. Yet, despite problems, China allowed repatriations and Taliban's swift victory meant India had to deal with just one entity.

The hazardous nature of the situation in Ukraine, particularly in the east and north where Russian forces are battling their way towards the capital Kyiv and looking to subdue cities like Kharkiv, came home with the death of Naveen Shekharappa who was killed while waiting outside a grocery store to collect food. The incident highlights the precarious situation of Indian students stuck in the fighting that makes any movement fraught with danger, even as food and mobile batteries run out. Rescuing some 5,000 students in the war zone is the focus of the government's efforts even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke to the leaders of Poland, Slovakia and Romania in recent days.

The decision to send senior ministers was a political signal as well as an upgrade in India's presence in the region (see accompanying story), even as the political and diplomatic pitch remains tricky. There have been careful but notable shifts in India's articulation on Ukraine even as it abstained from two votes at the UN. The stress on the need to respect territorial integrity and sovereignty of states, cessation of violence and the need for negotiations instead of war to settle differences points to India's unhappiness with the invasion. Modi's decision to receive a phone call from Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy hours after the UNSC vote was significant as the prime minister expressed "deep anguish" over the fighting and reiterated India's call for the violence to end. The phone call would not have gone down well in Moscow, but officials familiar with events point out that India had to consider not only its position on respecting the sovereignty of nations (relevant in terms of China's aggression on the Line of Actual Control) but also the fate of thousands of students whose extraction needed the cooperation of Ukrainian authorities.

In his conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the prime



OUT OF KYIV

The evacuation effort is mobilising every resource, whether diplomatic or civil society

About a week after the Ukraine crisis erupted, some 5,000 Indian students stuck in the war zone in the east and north of the country are the focus of the government's attention, as it explores every likely measure to extricate them to relatively safe areas in the west and then onward into neighbouring countries like Romania, Hungary and Poland.

Getting hold of transport and ensuring safe passage are proving to be a trial for Indian diplomats and the decision to dispatch senior ministers to the region is intended to lend political heft to the evacuation. Moving students located in the west to safer destinations is a less challenging task although even this required intense negotiations with a country like Poland which is receiving a large influx. Adding to the woes is the rough, and sometimes extractive, behaviour of Ukrainian border guards, demanding dollars from foreign nationals looking for an escape route.

As officials scoured for options, they looked at Slovakia, which shares a short border with Ukraine, but hit a roadblock: the available runways were not long enough to allow wide-bodied aircraft operated by Air India and the Indian Air Force—used for long distance flights—to land. But hoping to get students in west Ukraine out before that area is also enveloped in conflict, the government is considering getting hold of small aircraft so that as many students as possible can be sent to Slovakia and then to safer locations.

Government estimates, as of March 3, indicate that the students in west Ukraine could be evacuated in a week's time, with around 400-800 flown out every day depending on whether two or three flights are feasible. Deliberations by the Cabinet Committee on Security and consultations led by the PMO have seen voluntary organisations with a presence in Europe being roped in to help those who arrive in Ukraine's neighbouring countries. ISKCON is working to provide meals to students in Romania and mobile kitchens are being set up besides clothing and phones being arranged. Others like Art of Living and Swaminarayan Sanstha are working to help students arriving from Ukraine.

People familiar with the evacuation efforts, called *Operation Ganga*, said it was an "all of society" approach as every resource, diplomatic and civil society, was being considered. They said students stranded in east Ukraine were facing serious hardships like dimin-

ishing connectivity with 10 or more sharing one mobile phone while others are switched off to conserve power. They are also at risk from the shelling and exchange of fire. Unlike the British embassy that relocated to Lviv or the German mission that shut shop, the Indian embassy continues to function. The Chinese have put off evacuation plans with the envoy saying current conditions are too unsafe. The ambassador advised Chinese citizens not to "quarrel with locals" after claims surfaced on social media about hostility towards them.

The US has clearly stated that the government would not be able to evacuate citizens and advised them to seek private transportation, if available. The German embassy has also said it is not in a position to transport people out of Ukraine. While most countries issued travel advisories, China did not do so. China asked its nationals—some 6,000 are estimated to be in Ukraine—not to display any signs of identification after having initially asked them to put up flags on transport. According to Ukraine government data, some 80,000 international students are in the country, the largest bunch from India, followed by Morocco, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Nigeria. After the initial days, transit visas are being provided, with Romania and Hungary being the most cooperative.

Non-government sources said the problems at border crossings were common to most nationalities and did not have much to do with India's stance at the United Nations. Some of the guards were seeing an opportunity to 'prepare' for greater uncertainty as no one can guess how long the Ukrainian resistance will last despite the slow progress of the Russian campaign. There was also the possibility of guards prioritising Ukrainian nationals, many of them women, children and the elderly, as the exits were overloaded with crowds of people. On an average, it was taking two days' waiting to process exits for most nationalities with the US advising its nationals to keep food and water handy.

Latest reports speak of an Indian student being killed in the shelling in Kharkiv and this is what officials are most concerned about. If the fighting in the east were to cease, Indians could even consider the Russian border as an exit point. ■

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

minister emphasised that differences between Russia and NATO could only be resolved through “honest and sincere dialogue” and again called for a halt to violence and diplomatic negotiations. The Indian formulation left enough room for Russia to express satisfaction even as the Ukrainian envoy to India gave vent to his dissatisfaction. His comparison of the Russian invasion to the “massacre” of Rajputs by the Mughals conveyed a sense of desperation but inadvertently stepped on a few political tripwires in India where BJP’s rivals and critics, many who profess ‘secular’ credentials, attacked the government for failing to condemn Russian actions. The bottomline for India is that its relations with Russia go back a long way and cannot be jettisoned irrespective of the unilateral and violent intervention in Ukraine. India’s trade with Russia is much larger than with Ukraine and involves crucial aspects of defence, such as heavy and advanced weaponry. The latest deal for the supply of the S-400 Triumf missile defence systems is an important upgrade of capacities against Pakistan and China along with the acquisition of the French Rafale fighters. The existing hardware used by the Army and Air Force is dependent on Russian weapons and spares. Even the new AK-203 factory at Amethi will be set up with the cooperation of Russia through a special purpose joint venture. Russia and the erstwhile Soviet Union have often come to the rescue of India at the UN in the face of hostile moves by Pakistan compounded by indifference or even active collusion of the US and UK in the past. Russian assistance by way of emergency supply of weapons during the Kargil War in 1999 was instant and unconditional. Most significantly, say officials aware of India’s diplomatic moves, the government cannot but consider the lengthy and unresolved standoff with China on the Ladakh border which has seen Indian and Chinese troops clash.

CHINA AND THE Indo-Pacific remain India’s primary concerns and there is worry that the developments in Ukraine may see the US and Western powers, barring some like Australia, to focus more on Russia to the detriment of the Indo-Pacific. Some experts, however, feel this might be the case in the immediate context but the US is not likely to forget that China presents the real, long-term challenge to its military and technological superiority. The proximity of Russia and China, and the fact that the invasion of Ukraine happened not long after the two nations declared a “no limits” policy of cooperation, has not been lost on India or the West. Indian officials maintain that there is a difference between the arguments articulated at a government level as against the

popular discourse that is vehemently anti-Russian. They do not see serious pressure on India to outright condemn Russia and be part of any sanctions regime. Responding to the issue, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said the US relationship with India stands on its own merit. There is recognition that India has little to gain by acting in a manner that will only tighten the Russia-China embrace. In the longer run, this does not help the cause of the US or Europe either, given the rising disquiet over China’s ambition of replacing America as the pre-eminent power.

The impact of the war in Ukraine is difficult to assess as much depends on how long hostilities go on and how they conclude. So far, no nation has been ready to put boots on the ground in sup-

port of Ukraine and though the Russian advance is slow, possibly to avoid more widespread casualties, the odds are against the Eurasian nation. At any rate, Russian forces are likely to be in Ukraine for some time even as it is unclear whether Putin will want to bring the entire country under his control or stop after capturing Kyiv with the objective of installing a puppet. However, his actions have thoroughly disrupted the post-Cold War order as there is a serious possibility of the Baltic States and Ukraine’s neighbours Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Moldova marking the new Iron Curtain dividing Russia from Europe. The resulting insecurities in East and Central Europe can well prompt West European powers and the US to position more weapons and soldiers to prevent Putin from threatening smaller neighbours and Nordic countries like Sweden and Finland which he has warned against considering NATO membership. Russia’s actions in turn appear to be fuelled by a long list of grievances at being let down

by the West since the Berlin Wall collapsed along with paranoia about NATO expansion and missiles in Central Europe undermining its security. The volatile situation, marked by a severe lack of trust and communication, can lead to wider conflict.

Apart from the strategic domain, India may need to brace for the impact on the economic front in terms of higher inflation due to a likely rise in oil and commodity prices. Much rests on how long the crisis drags and this is hard to predict. The diplomacy will, after the current focus on evacuating Indian nationals is over, focus on nudging a dialogue process to resolve the Ukrainian crisis. The proceedings at the UN and bilateral conversations present an opportunity for careful articulation, while it is evident that it will be for Europe and the US to lead the response as the Ukraine crisis affects NATO most directly. In domestic terms, the developments are likely to quicken efforts to indigenise India’s arms industry, as already outlined by the Budget, even though this is bound to be a long haul. ■



Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia met Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciuca to facilitate the entry of Indian citizens across the Ukrainian border, March 2, 2022

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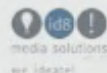
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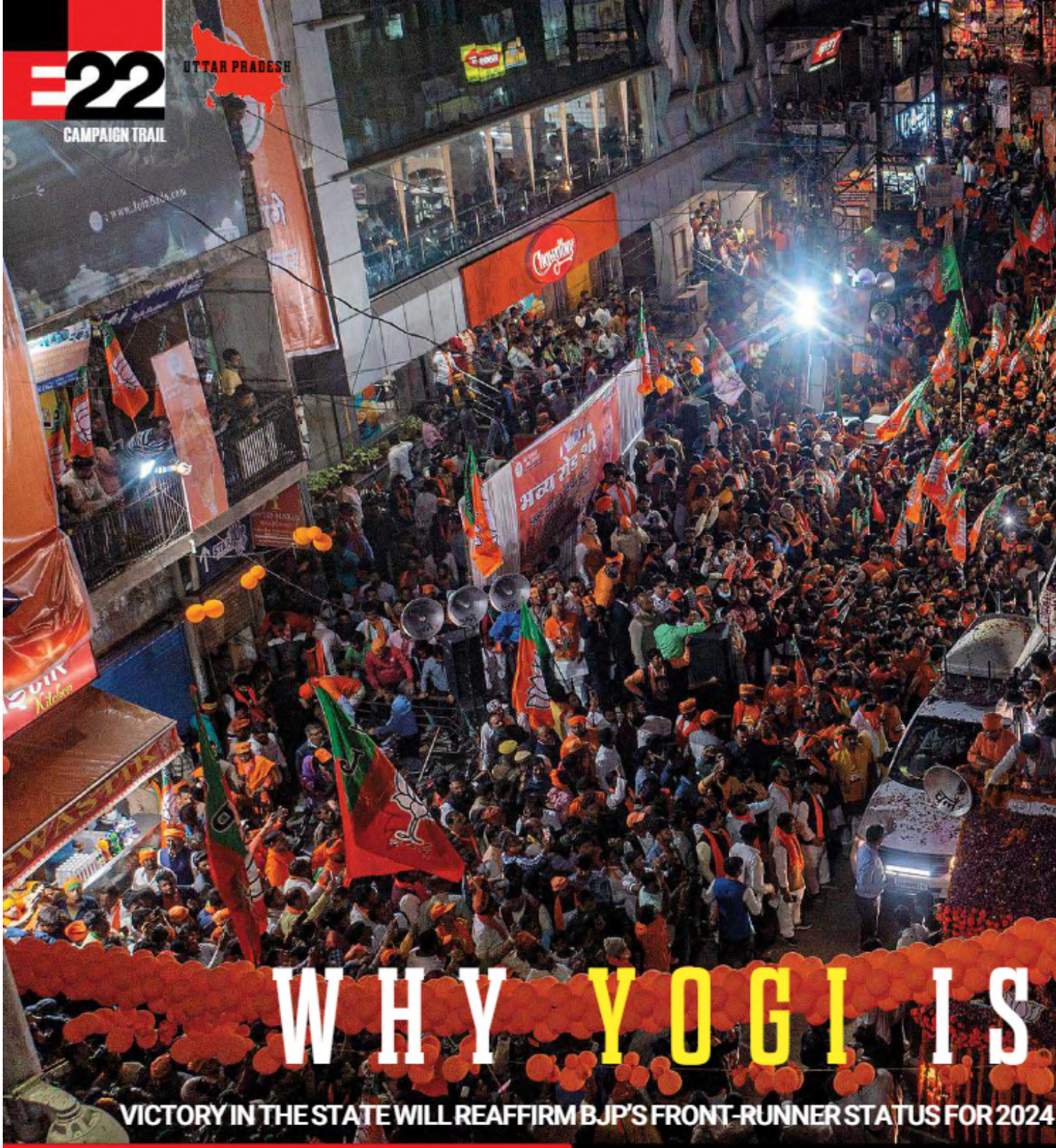
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WHY YOGI IS

VICTORY IN THE STATE WILL REAFFIRM BJP'S FRONT-RUNNER STATUS FOR 2024

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

THE SMALL BUT sturdy chopper has just taken off from Shahbad in Uttar Pradesh's (UP) Hardoi district. The dust whipped up by the blades is swirling, but people lined on the roofs or dispersing from the field where a "*chunav sabha*" (election meeting) has just concluded are still waving at the departing bird. Just as Yogi

Adityanath settles back in his seat, an aide reaches out with a single sheet of paper with talking points for the next meeting, outlining key local notables who would be present and issues that needed mention.

It takes Adityanath a few minutes to scan the sheet before he closes his eyes for a catnap. Elections for the third phase are closing



AND SECURE A SEAT FOR THE CHIEF MINISTER AT THE PARTY'S HIGH TABLE

and the UP chief minister and Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) poll mascot is on a quick foray into Hardoi and Rae Bareilly, the schedule having been drawn up at the last minute. "I was told that this push would help, so we are going to places that were finalised just last evening," he says as the chopper begins its descent for the next halt 20-odd minutes later. The campaign venues are in the rural

interiors as evident from the unbroken rolling green and brown patchwork of the countryside and have been chosen with care, small *bastis* and markets that are nerve centres of local life.

The crowd at Mallawan, as at other places, numbers a few thousand and has been waiting impatiently. Shouts of "Modi, Yogi" break out as the chief minister reaches the ground. Given

the relative remoteness of the location, it is a goodly gathering. Adityanath dives straight into his speech once greetings and introductions are over, asserting that his government has changed the paradigm of development and governance in contrast to caste and political mafias who ruled the roost under his predecessors. "There is a difference that is obvious to all of you. This is because development is not just a slogan for us and we are committed to deliver what is due to you," he says.

THE VACCINATION PROGRAMME is a significant component of Adityanath's pitch, a decision reflecting confidence that rather than being a weak spot as some analysts and political opponents have argued, the state's Covid management is in fact a marker of efficient governance. The chief minister points to the mild impact of the Omicron wave to contend that UP has done a good job and targets rivals like Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav as naysayers. "The arrival and departure of the third wave

minister refers to this as the chopper resumes its onward journey, saying this would not be the case if the opposition's claims about widespread discontent over unemployment were true. He counters by pointing out that the state has stayed afloat despite two years of Covid and welfare schemes have sustained the vulnerable. The situation could very well have been the other way round, he says. Adityanath intersperses his short speeches, usually no more than 20 minutes, with a series of questions seeking affirmative responses. "Unlike in the past, are you getting regular electricity? Earlier there would be no electricity on Diwali and Holi but there would be on Eid...Now, are you not getting electricity without any discrimination?" he asks. The same goes for law and order, which the chief minister says touches everyone, and with free rations. The robust and approving responses bolster his assessment that the election is going well for BJP.

As the UP polls hurtle to a much-anticipated finale, it is clear that Adityanath is fighting the most important election of his career, ever since he took over the Gorakhpur parliamentary seat from his guru Mahant Avaidyanath in 1998 and at 26 became the youngest member of the 12th Lok Sabha. A personal and political voyage that began in the Garhwal hills as Ajay Bisht and sent him to New Delhi as a five-time MP via Gorakhpur took an unexpected turn when he was named chief minister after BJP's big win in the 2017 Assembly election. The decision moved Adityanath from the sidelines of his party to centre stage, making him a key factor in BJP's political planning as sweeping verdicts in UP, that came at the expense of caste satraps Akhilesh Yadav and Bahujan Samaj Party's Mayawati, have set up Prime Minister Narendra Modi's successive Lok Sabha majorities. A win in the current election will reaffirm BJP's front-runner status for the 2024 General Election but will also secure a seat for Adityanath at BJP's high table. He became chief minister as a nominee of the leadership, but if he succeeds, it will be as much because of his Hindutva and 'doer' credentials apart from the Modi factor. His cut-outs jostle with Modi's allies and the



ADITYANATH CAMPAIGNS IN HATHRAS, FEBRUARY 14, 2022

was hardly noticed. This was because we worked tirelessly to ensure vaccines reached everyone. This saved us. Now, there were those who said this is a 'BJP vaccine, Modi vaccine'...Please tell them it is Modi vaccine that worked. *Inkavote ki chot do* (Make them feel the hurt of the vote). Reject them on polling day with a slap," he says. With UP delivering 28.8 crore doses (16.45 crore first doses) for a population of 25 crore, the chief minister feels he has earned bragging rights and doesn't hesitate to rub it in. "How many of you have been vaccinated?" he asks and seeing raised hands, adds, "Did you have to pay for the shots?" The crowd roars back "No!"

The crowds at Adityanath's meetings have a strong representation of enthusiastic youth and a fair number of women. The chief

reception he receives, particularly from younger voters, sets him apart. He is unapologetic in his advocacy of Hindutva as he says being Hindu is his identity and he does not need to tom-tom the fact (see interview). In the politically polarised cauldron of eastern UP, his Hindu Vahini was seen as a counter to political mafias of a rival colour and he made no bones about his unflinching support for causes like cow protection. Yet, as an administrator, he surprised many, including those in his own party. He displayed a natural instinct for fiscal prudence (the poll promise of a farm loan waiver was mostly financed from the state budget) associated with economic conservatives. But he also adopted a welfarist approach, using technology to improve accountability while the

economic viability of welfare schemes was not lost sight of. Adityanath rebuts suggestions that the schemes are 'doles' encouraging dependence, saying government assistance has led to asset creation and higher incomes.

A mid-air lunch is served as the chopper sets course for Rae Bareilly and while the rest of the company opens boxes with *roti*, *kichadi* with gram *dal* and a beans and potato mix, Adityanath unzips a pack with three small containers. No carbs for him, as he quickly disposes modest portions of lightly fried vegetables and a helping of fruit. He elaborates on why he considers police reforms an important agenda, looking beyond political aspects of law and order where he reminds voters of the bias of the SP government and the free run of politically aligned mafias. "When I assumed office, the Supreme Court had banned police recruitment due to scams. We presented a plan to make the process transparent and the court relented...this took some time," he said, adding that he instructed the testing agency to ensure no leaks. "Even I should not know what you are doing," he says as having emphasised. Promising fair policing is one thing, making it happen is another. Fresh recruitment was followed by upgrading capacities for forensics and cyber crime investigation. "New police stations and living quarters and more women personnel," he says were some of the goals set, adding that modernisation of the police force is absolutely essential in view of the diverse—and even transnational—nature of security challenges.

THE CHIEF MINISTER'S 'tough guy' image has been fashioned by the 'encounter' policy the police adopted early in his tenure, where criminals wanted for serious offences risked being shot if they resisted arrest, and later measures, such as seeking reparations for damages during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests. The damages sought for rioting have come under adverse scrutiny of the Supreme Court but Adityanath believes such pro-active steps nipped the violence in the bud and says that there was a clear design to spark riots first in Aligarh and then in Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly and Varanasi. "It was no coincidence that violence broke out at Aligarh around the same time as it did at Jamia [in Delhi]," he says. Pointing to the incidence of rioting having plummeted during his tenure, Adityanath tells a crowd at Mallawan in Hardoi, "I caught hold of the pulse [*nabz*] of the rioters." Like Modi, he seeks to make a political connection between 'cycle' and the anti-terror verdict of a Gujarat court in the serial blasts case where IEDs were planted on bicycles, and reiterates his message that unlike in the case of SP, his government has not been slack in combating terrorism, a discourse that goes down well with the crowd.

THE CROWDS HAVE A STRONG REPRESENTATION OF ENTHUSIASTIC YOUTH AND WOMEN. THE CHIEF MINISTER SAYS THE STATE HAS STAYED AFLOAT DESPITE TWO YEARS OF COVID AND WELFARE SCHEMES HAVE SUSTAINED THE VULNERABLE. THE SAME GOES FOR LAW AND ORDER

At Lalganj in Rae Bareilly, Adityanath focuses on Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi, accusing them of being bystanders during the Covid crisis. "Did the brother-sister from Delhi turn up and ask about you? All that they did was raise doubts about vaccines," he says, adding that Priyanka's list of 1,000 buses to be provided to ferry migrants was riddled with inaccuracies. "Registration numbers of two-wheelers were passed off as buses," he claims. More damagingly, he accuses Congress of having 'obstructed' the construction of the Ram Mandir, saying the Gandhi siblings are scrambling to prove they are Ram *bhakt*s. He points to BJP's commitment to a temple in Ayodhya as an example of its ability to walk the talk. The mandir is not the main point of his speeches but comes in handy in arguing that the construction of the temple would not have begun if BJP had not been in office in Delhi and Lucknow. As his pointed messaging indicates, Adityanath deftly weaves in Hindutva themes with development and governance, often playing to a subtle overlap when he targets mafias he says were promoted by SP. Interestingly, though BJP managers insist BSP's vote has not dwindled to the levels anticipated by some commentators, the chief minister does not dwell much on Mayawati, apart from referring now and again to public funds vanishing without trace in the elephant's large belly, an obvious reference to the party's poll symbol. While raising the stakes on law and order, the chief minister picks on Rahul Gandhi's remarks in Lok Sabha describing India as a "union of states" and not a nation to argue that BJP's opponents cannot be trusted with handling national security in a responsible fashion. As he winds up campaigning for the day, Adityanath takes a few minutes to respond to the "Baba bulldozer" jibe levelled by Akhilesh Yadav, saying the machine can target properties of criminals as well as flatten the earth for highways which he says the government is building speedily. Aware of the significant presence of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the seats going to the polls, he refers to the late Kalyan Singh and rebukes SP leaders for failing to pay their tributes, indirectly raising the question whether this was due to vote bank considerations.

As a setting sun casts long shadows, the energy levels at the large clearing where the Rae Bareilly meeting was held remain high. Shouts of "Yogi, Yogi" follow the chief minister as he latches the safety harness and the chopper's blades spin faster and the engine noise rises to a shrill whine. The day has not ended and there are a couple of meetings in Lucknow before the campaign ends at 6PM. As the pilots set course, an aide briefs the chief minister on engagements later in the evening. Soon the helicopter settles on a field adjacent to the chief minister's official residence and Adityanath quickly alights. Shortly, a radio message informs he has entered his quarters. ■

INTERVIEW

YOGI ADITYANATH Chief Minister

'SECURITY IS THE FOUNDATION OF VIKAS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE'

*It's 9:45 AM. The chief minister has just finished a review of the Covid situation and is looking ahead to a day of chopper-hopping and roadshows. Expressing confidence about returning to office, Yogi Adityanath explains to **PR RAMESH** and **RAJEEV DESHPANDE** why beneficiaries of welfare schemes will back BJP and rebuts the charge that his party is polarising the election. Excerpts:*

Half of the election in Uttar Pradesh (UP) is over, what is your assessment of how it has gone for BJP?

It has gone well, going by the response of the electorate. *Is baar bhi BJP 300 paar hogi* (This time too, BJP will cross 300). There should be no doubt on this score.

There is a discussion and some hype about the opposition alliance that Jats have joined (the SP-RLD alliance) and Most Backward Classes (MBCs) have also moved...

There was a bigger alliance against us in 2019. You can make an assessment about that alliance by the fact that in 1993, after the structure at Ramjanmabhoomi came down and elections were held thereafter, there was an SP-BSP alliance, and Congress won on its own, not as helpless as it is today. The alliance won. Then it came together in 2019. In other words, after 26 years and by then people had seen the reality of these parties. People have experienced the name and work of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In 2019, SP, BSP, Congress, RLD all came together. What was the result? Did BJP not win 80 per cent of the seats? All the rest were confined to 20 per cent. So, that is what I am saying today—this is a division of 80 and 20. BJP is 80 and SP, BSP, Congress and the rest are 20. In 2019, there was a lot of noise about SP but it was BSP that won the second largest share of 10 Lok Sabha seats after BJP's 64. This election has also reached a similar trajectory. I can tell you the results in almost every seat. The direction of the polls tells you clearly what the results will be. Second, no one can imagine the way the vote of half the population is moving in favour of BJP.

On the issue of security, on issues related to the home and hearth...you see, however much a person may progress, if the issue of security is uncertain, then what is the meaning of development? The foundation of *vikas* and good governance is security. And this has happened; every person is experiencing the benefits of a secure atmosphere. Maybe this experience varies in west UP, Bundelkhand, in the east. In west (UP) the terror of a certain group and an individual has been ended. In Bundelkhand, it was freedom from the mining mafia. In central UP, it was freedom from professional criminals and *goondas*, the caste criminals. In the east, people were freed from the mafia who controlled political power. This is an issue in the entire state. And let me tell you that this is above caste and religion. Did you note the statement of Shia religious leader Kalbe Jawad? He is not from BJP, is he? Did he not say one thing? That those who can stop riots should be supported. After all, did they not suffer due to riots? If you burn (properties) of one side, the other side also suffers similarly, does it not? *Is paksh ka marega to doosre paksh ka jinda thode rehta hai*. The ill effects of a



curfew are felt by traders of all communities. Now all of this—recurring riots—is a thing of the past in UP. A state like UP is today talking of security and good governance. This is a good sign and people are appreciating it.

A related question is the charge that BJP is polarising the situation.

How are we polarising the situation? Who is trying to polarise things? On October 31, when we were commemorating the anniversary of the architect of modern India, Sardar Patel, the SP chief chose that very day to praise Jinnah. When we were discussing development and good governance, when we were presenting our record to the public, that was the day the SP chief sang paeans to Pakistan. Please note that we are not polarising...it is they (the opposition) that has fanned polarisation. All for political gains. This is not the first time either. In 2012, Akhilesh Yadav became the chief

minister and the next year he tried to withdraw cases against some two and a half dozen terrorists. Recently, a court in Ahmedabad has pronounced the death penalty for 38 terrorists and sentenced some others to life for the serial blasts in Gujarat. Eight terrorists have a UP connection. The father of one of them is an SP *pracharak*. Akhilesh Yadav has offered no clarification. He is mum. Why is he commenting on other issues but not on this? He gives a clean chit to Pakistan, but on the issue of terrorists who caused blasts in UP that killed dozens? Just the Sankat Mochan blast killed 28 people. More than 56 died in the Gujarat serial blasts. The terrorist from Azamgarh, Mohammed Saif, whose father is an SP member, and whose brother was part of the Batla House gang and has run away to Syria...there's not a word from Akhilesh Yadav about them. So polarisation is not being done by us. But yes, it is our responsibility to speak the truth. This is the truth we are placing before the electorate—that these are people who would play with their

security and the nation's security. How could they be trusted?

It is also being said that your opponents might have polarised votes but BJP has failed to counter-polarise.

We have no need to bring about any such polarisation. We have spoken of *sabka saath, sabka vikas*. We are talking of security for all. There is no case that we are attempting any polarisation but, as I have said, we will place the truth before the public. We will tell them to be wary of such people.

There is a view that MBCs, many of whom backed BJP in 2014, 2017 and 2019, have slipped out of your hands.

What do you think?

The context of the exit of ministers from BJP to SP?

Please tell me, if they were people with popular support, why have they left their seats? Why are they fleeing their traditional seats? Then, there is another matter: After having had the cream for five years, now that their unethical and illegal acts were being prevented, what options did they have? Is the *janata* not seeing all this? Our people are politically very sagacious. They know everyone. There is no need to issue a certificate to anyone or point out flaws... people are well aware of realities.

You have spoken of the state's welfare schemes. Can it be said that this is a new vote bank for BJP?

People who were often ignored right since Independence, are they not getting something today? Please see examples of how our government works. Not too long ago, between 2012 and 2017, during the tenure of the SP government, 18,000 poor people were sanctioned a house each. No one actually got a house; it was on the file. It was all the same, just like there was no power on Diwali and Holi but it would be there on Muharram and Eid. After the Modi government assumed office, it framed a policy and said a certain group, which is eligible, will get benefits and it will not be on the basis of region, caste and religion. The point is that SP was not interested in development. We have also got five years in office of which two were consumed battling the coronavirus. But houses were provided to more than 43.5 lakh people. Is there no difference? We touched those who have never benefited from any scheme since Independence like the Musahars. In east UP, from Maharajganj, Kushinagar till Bihar, there is a considerable Musahar population. We have given a ticket to this community too and this will be the first time that a Musahar will enter the Assembly. They were not under any scheme, so I brought them under the Chief Minister Awas Yojana and they got rights to plots and houses. Similarly, with Tharu, Koland Chero, we brought lakhs from these castes within the ambit of our schemes. During the

Covid pandemic, rations were provided twice a month to the poor, in fact, often pandemics have killed more due to hunger than disease. In a state of 25 crore, we have had 23,000 deaths. Each is painful but we can draw inferences. With a similar population, Brazil saw 4.5 lakh deaths. Maharashtra has a population half of that of UP at 12 crore and saw around two lakh deaths. Delhi, with a population of two crore, has seen 30,000 deaths. Whenever we discuss Covid arrangements, there will be a discussion on death rates. Deaths from hunger used to take place before 2017. I can say that in December 2016 and January 2017, when I was an MP, I went to places where deaths were happening in Kushinagar, Chitrakoot and Sonbhadra. I can say that there have been no deaths due to hunger since 2017. The first thing I did was to launch an operation to ensure every eligible person had a ration card. When I saw there were leakages, 80,000 ration shops were connected with e-pos machines. All of them were connected to a video wall in my office. If you move the machine even a few feet, an alert will be sounded. When the Supreme

Court asked whether people were receiving rations, surveys conducted by the Centre showed that 96 per cent beneficiaries were getting their dues in UP.

Look at UP's health infrastructure, between 1947 and 2017, only 12 medical colleges came up. We are in the process of setting up a medical college in each of the 75 districts. We have seen 39 colleges come up in the government sector.

Can we talk of UP's Covid management? Some people have expressed surprise at the moderate numbers given a large population.

There were no accidents either. No instance of fire at any hospital as was seen in many states. If you leave aside allegations and counter-allegations due to political motives, we implemented the 3T (test, track, treat) advocated by Prime Minister Modi. I monitored it myself and continue to do so. I was checking the reports before meeting you (this morning). I then speak to concerned persons in a district. "Why is such and such matter being reported?" I have been doing this constantly and we have hardly felt the arrival and departure of the third wave. As of now, we have only 6,000 active cases. We have a capacity of four lakh tests a day and we have ICUs in every district. This needs initiative and effort. Our call centres are active in tracking patients 'Did the doctor call? Are you getting food? Etc.' I would follow up and ask district magistrates and chief medical officers to wear PPE kits and show me on video that they were visiting hospitals. I would visit places where I felt there were problems and take the officials with me to the wards. The chain of Covid was broken. Delhi and Maharashtra could not manage this. The challenge was so serious that a small instance of carelessness would lead to a serious situation. We saw in the case of Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand that when people began to go back to their homes

"We have no need for any polarisation. We have spoken of *sabka saath, sabka vikas*. We are talking of security for all. We will place the truth before the public"

during the lockdown, the states refused to take them back. I felt that this was my responsibility and no one should die of hunger. How much will a person eat? Only some *poori-sabzi*? *Arre* we can surely provide *kichadi*! At least people will not starve. We looked after people from these states and sent them on with a lunch pack. They kept the boxes and said we received this from Yogiji. Can you just put up your hands at a time of a humanitarian crisis? And then claim to be concerned about human rights? Can there be a bigger charade?

Since 1985, no government has returned to office and neither has a chief minister. Are you looking to set a record?
See, I am here only to break myths, not for the benefits of power.

A recent statement about UP doing better than Kerala and West Bengal created a controversy. What did you mean to say?

I don't know if we should do a comparison or not. Every state government is functioning in accordance with its thinking and style. But elections are on in UP. Have you heard of any violence? No disorder, no *goondagardi*. Elections being held in such a peaceful manner in UP was beyond imagination, wasn't it? Was this the case in Kerala and West Bengal? So that is what I was indicating.

People thought you were hinting at Hindu-Muslim or development indicators.

I spoke of what I am saying—about where violence flares up or used to. You must understand the value of UP benefiting from good law and order. Everyone is respected. The state must be saved from those taking it in the opposite direction.

When you spoke of the emergence of a class of beneficiaries, for welfare schemes, can this be something that consistently counters caste politics?

This (caste politics) broke in 2014. These people (the opposition) can try all they can, keep banging their heads, but it will not help. Today, no party can say they did not get the chance to be in office. Everyone's way of working has been seen and assessed. The public has seen us too. I think I was at the helm at the most challenging time the state has faced since Independence (due to Covid). The Ramjanmabhoomi decision was pronounced and not a fleck or a straw moved. People went out of their way to support me. I spoke to everyone, all the dharma gurus. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christians, all. At my request Muharram processions were cancelled. They agreed because there is no suspicion as to our intent and character. Our thoughts are clear and our intent is above board. Am I supposed to go to a chowk and beat a drum and say I am a Hindu? Of course, I am a Hindu. That is my

identity (*pehchan*). I don't need to talk about that. It's the same with my work style.

Will not beneficiaries of welfare schemes become a case of riding the tiger, since people's expectations can keep rising?

The class or section of beneficiaries (*labharthi warg*) is not those who are getting things 'free'. They are needy. We are moving them towards economic self-sufficiency. I will give you a few examples. I had gone to Sonbhadra to review the PM housing schemes. I saw a Musahar lady who was looking at me in a hesitant sort of way. She was wearing frayed old clothes, looking scared. I noticed her and asked her what was the matter, and she said, "Will I get a colony too?" That is what a house is called. I asked, "Who are you?" I found that her name was not in the SECC (socio-economic caste census) and so she was included under the CM scheme. I forgot the matter. Sometime later, I was there again to check on refurbishing of schools. I then went to the Musahar area to

check on toilet construction. I heard a voice say "Baba, see my house." I thought this might be the same lady. "*Arre* your house is ready?" I asked her. You will be surprised to know that she had built two rooms. The government gave her ₹1.3 lakh and ₹12,000 for a toilet and ₹12,000 as 90 days of MGNREGA wages. On being asked where she got the additional money, she said her husband had some savings in a Jan Dhan account. There was a small shed where she intended to keep a buffalo. This is what I mean—some help from the government becomes the basis for or motivation to do more and become self-sufficient. The family will

experience economic wellbeing. They will not be dependent on the government for everything.

You are confident of returning to office. What will be the big priorities?

The programmes that have been launched will continue and must not slow down if we are to make UP the No 1 state. I believe it is possible. We have moved to the second spot from the sixth in the last five years. We implemented several reforms. We have moved keeping in mind the public interest. On security, for example, we have to pursue more police reforms. We have worked on transparency in recruitment, improved capacities for training and housing. Many police stations did not have a building and this was attended to. Cyber and forensic capacities will be improved. We have tripled the number of women police personnel. Then our task to connect villages with optical fibre networks will continue just as service centres with Wi-Fi have been set up to ensure people get their documentation easily. Women have been hired as bank correspondents. People are seeing all this and there is more to be done. ■

AKHILESH YADAV AND THE LIMITS OF VOTE BANKS

HAS THE SAMAJWADI PARTY'S
DEPENDENCE ON MUSLIM-YADAV
SUPPORT DISTANCED OTHER
SECTIONS OF THE ELECTORATE?

By **AMITA SHAH**

HIS VOICE CRACKS. Barring that, former Chief Minister and Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Akhilesh Yadav shows no sign of campaign fatigue. It is less than two hours to go before canvassing ends for the fifth phase of the Uttar Pradesh (UP) elections when he emerges through the lift atop his 'rath', a red bus, on the banks of the Sarayu in Ayodhya. Standing on the bus, holding a mike, he starts by paying obeisance to "avatars of bhagwan Vishnu"—Ram, Krishna and Parashuram—and the seers.

He looks around at the crowd, which has been waiting for over two hours, and says this kind of support was "not possible without the blessings of Lord Ram and Hanuman". And then,

before starting his roadshow through the temple town where the Ram Mandir is being constructed, goes on to talk of the "*Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb*", an Awadhi phrase symbolically equating the confluence of the two rivers in Allahabad to the blending of Hindu-Muslim culture. "In this place Ram is everywhere. This is the culture of this place. It's a *mili juli sanskriti* (harmonious culture), a Ganga-Jamuni culture. I am confident you will protect this tradition by defeating BJP."

Akhilesh was 17 when in 1990 his father Mulayam Singh Yadav, the then UP chief minister, ordered police firing on *kar sevaks* marching towards the Babri Masjid, saying the mosque would not be brought down. Over three decades later, when the Ram temple is under construction where the Babri mosque



Photographs by **ASHISH SHARMA**



AKHILESH YADAV LANDS IN AYODHYA ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, FEBRUARY 25, 2022

once stood, the police firing haunts Akhilesh with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) missing no opportunity to remind people of it.

In Ayodhya, Akhilesh flits between brandishing his religious identity and his socialist roots. He wields a *gada*, the rounded metal weapon carried by Hanuman, takes the blessings of seers and prays at the Hanumangarhi temple before winding up his roadshow. With sandalwood paste smeared on his forehead and garlands around his neck—a new battle gear—he tells the media that this time his party has God’s blessings.

He promises development of Ayodhya, the temple town which has been at the heart of BJP’s politics, from increasing circle rates if land is taken for development work and giving six times compensation to people to free water and 300 units

of power. On the construction of the Ram temple, he says BJP was taking credit for what was a Supreme Court decision, as he stands on the rath which has 13 images, ranging from Suheldev, the legendary king known to have killed Ghaznavid General Ghazi Miyan at Bahraich in 1034CE, to socialist leaders and former president APJ Abdul Kalam.

Akhilesh breaks into light humour, smiling, as he responds to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath’s attack on him, repeatedly referring to him as “*Baba Mukhya Mantri*”. The crowd goes into a frenzy. Just a day before, Adityanath had held a roadshow in Ayodhya. “From the crowds it looks like there is a close battle between the two,” says Dinesh Kumar, who runs a sweat shop, as the rath moves through the town. As the sun starts setting and

the time for campaigning comes to an end, Akhilesh's road show on BJP's turf has to be cut short. He had landed late. As the crowds waited, shouting slogans, beating drums and waving flags, with the afternoon sun beating down, a journalist familiar with his frequent running behind the schedule for rallies, comments he is like Salman Khan, always late.

Away from the din of the rally, on the serene banks of the Sarayu, Shekhar Pandey, who runs a stall under a shack, is unhappy with BJP MLA Ved Prakash Gupta but backs BJP because of Adityanath and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. SP has put up Pawan Pandey, a former state minister, a Brahmin who won in 2012, the only time BJP lost the seat after 1992. "If it was not for Modi, we would have suffered much more during Covid. The free rations saved us. If Akhilesh returns, law and order will again be a problem," says Pandey. He points to the steps on the banks of the river and says they were built under Akhilesh, but adds that Adityanath did more development.

IT IS A KIND OF catch-22 for Akhilesh. In the political number crunching, he relies on the Muslim-Yadav equation (Muslims constitute 19 per cent of the state's population and Yadavs about 9 per cent), yet it is his party's affiliation to them that is keeping large sections outside these vote banks from backing him. "It is Hindutva versus Muslim appeasement. There is fear among people that it will be the latter again if Akhilesh returns to power," says Sudhir Kumar, who runs a dhaba on the highway from Ayodhya to Lucknow at Salempur village of Zaidpur Assembly constituency in Barabanki district. It's a common refrain heard in UP—Akhilesh has done good work but... The 'but' implies "Muslim and Yadav appeasement", a memory that remains embedded, even five years after he was voted out of office. BJP makes the most of this apprehension, targeting him as "anti Hindu". Akhilesh's political positioning in Ayodhya, from his rath on which a slogan goes "*nai hawa hai, nai SP hai*" (a new wind, a new SP), indicating a new identity, is an apparent attempt to shed this baggage at a time when BJP is reaching out to the majority Hindu community, blurring caste lines in a state where caste affiliations have traditionally held sway over elections.

Akhilesh has nominated 63 Muslim candidates while in the 2017 election, his party, then in

alliance with Congress, gave tickets to 87 aspirants from the community. If Adityanath knows that Hindutva cannot pay political dividends without development, Akhilesh is aware that ignoring Ram may hurt his party's prospects. He has emerged as the lone contender to 'Baba', edging Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Congress out of the race, narrowing the prospects of the anti-BJP vote getting split among SP, BSP and Congress. Mayawati, however, despite being a pale image of herself in this election, has been holding on to her Jatav vote, which is about 9 per cent of the state's population. In 2017, BJP, which had wooed the non-Jatavs, had won 69 of the 84 reserved seats. It had also won over the non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This time, Akhilesh has set his eyes beyond his Yadav vote bank among OBCs. SP has given tickets to 171 backward caste candidates, the highest followed by BJP at 143 and BSP at 114. Of these 171 SP candidates, the Yadavs take the chunk of the share with 52 tickets while there are 37 Kurmis, a community which did not see eye-to-eye with the Yadavs. The Kurmis, a tiller caste, constitute around 8 per cent of the state's population. Unlike in 2017, when SP aligned with Congress and in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls when it fought in alliance with BSP, Akhilesh has reached out to smaller parties of OBCs this time. SP has aligned with Om Prakash Rajbhar's Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP), which had fought the 2017 election in alliance with BJP, Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), the rival of Anupriya Patel's Apna Dal (Sonelal), a BJP ally, Jayant Chaudhary's Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) to reach out to the Jats, particularly in western UP, and Sanjay Chauhan's Janvadi Party (Socialist). SP fielded Anupriya's sister

CAMPAIGNING IN AYODHYA, FEBRUARY 25, 2022



Pallavi Patel in Sirathu, to take on Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya. Akhilesh had lost no time in getting on board three OBC ministers—Swami Prasad Maurya, Dara Singh Chauhan and Dharam Singh Saini—who quit BJP.

“The Yogi government has cut the OBC quota. And, children in the general category only are getting scholarships,” laments a group of youngsters belonging to various OBC castes, including Most Backward Classes (MBCs), at Bikapur in Faizabad district. They are hoping Akhilesh will ensure employment for the youth. In the same market, Mukesh Gupta, a college student, complains of law and order in the Akhilesh regime and says Adityanath ensured justice for all.

AKHILESH YADAV IS fighting not just Yogi Adityanath but also Prime Minister Narendra Modi, an MP from Varanasi, who has made UP his “*karmabhoomi*”. Facing an onslaught from the entire BJP brass—Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and party chief JP Nadda—besides Adityanath, Akhilesh retorts with aplomb, at times in sharp tirades and at times with tongue-in-cheek nonchalance. A day after taking on BJP on its turf at Ayodhya, Akhilesh targeted Adityanath in his bastion, Gorakhpur. “Our *gau mata* (cow), which is Baba Chief Minister’s favourite animal, is roaming around hungry.” With cattle roaming through villages and streets, Akhilesh is hoping to cash in on the anger of the farmers over the issue. He has promised to find an end to the problem by ensuring rehabilitation of the animals.

“Farmers are troubled because of cattle. They have had to fence the farms. Earlier, they could at least sleep peacefully,” says Vijay Chauhan, a Nishad, selling snacks and sweets at a tea shop at Fatehabad on the Agra expressway. Chauhan praises Adityanath and Modi, saying free rations have helped but resents that unemployment persists.

Along the same highway, in a row of shops at Sarojini Nagar, there is unwavering support for Adityanath. “*Baba achha kaam kar rahe hain*. Akhilesh *ke time par* Hindu *daba raha* (Baba is doing good work. During Akhilesh’s time, Hindus were suppressed),” says Aman Rawat, as he adds spoonfuls of sugar to a large vessel of tea. He praises the law and order situation under Adityanath.

Under attack over “lawlessness” during his tenure, particularly from the BJP leadership, Akhilesh has tried to dust off the taint adopting a zero-tolerance approach to crime. “If anyone here does not want to follow the law or encourages crime and criminals, those who want to break the law or want to go beyond the law, please do not vote for us,” he said at a rally at Maharajganj, a seat BJP had wrested from SP in 2017. As he tries to turn a new leaf, learning from the past, Akhilesh is reinventing SP,

with a single goal—defeating BJP.

In Kanpur-based political analyst AK Verma’s assessment, going by the way Akhilesh was countering the onslaught, he may get more votes, but it has to be seen whether these could add up to ensure victory. In 2017, when SP aligned with Congress, it had got a vote share of 21.8 per cent with 47 seats, the lowest since the party was formed in 1992. BJP, which won UP after a gap of 14 years, swept the state with 311 of the 403 seats and a vote share of 41 per cent. “The question is whether the incumbent government is losing any section. Is any social component deserting BJP? In fact, there could be a gender consolidation in favour of BJP in light of law and order and toilets, which bring them psychological security,” says Verma.

Akhilesh’s age and Masters degree in engineering from Australia have earned him the reputation of being a young, educated leader, though at 48 he is just a year younger than Adityanath. When Akhilesh became chief minister at 38 in 2012, Mulayam Singh was at the helm of the party. By 2017, SP was a divided house, with Akhilesh’s uncle and party veteran Shivpal Yadav floating his own Pragatisheel Samajwadi Party (Lohiya) after a bitter parting in September 2016. Akhilesh divested his uncle of all ministerial posts after his father made Shivpal the state unit president. In Saifai, the Yadav home town in Etawah district, the elderly held on to their allegiance to Netaji while the young pointed towards Akhilesh’s state-of-the-art cricket stadium, an all-season indoor swimming pool and sports college and the Agra-Lucknow highway, just five kilometres from Saifai. Torn between Mulayam and Akhilesh, the old and the young, at a time when an iron-willed BJP under Modi’s leadership was leaving no stone unturned to win UP, SP faced a humiliating defeat. This time, Akhilesh seems to have managed to heal the wounds, ending the turf war

in his family. In December, he went to Shivpal’s residence in Lucknow and sought his blessings. Ahead of the third phase of elections in which Karhal, where Akhilesh is fighting against Union minister SP Singh Baghel, went to polls, the trio—Mulayam, Akhilesh and Shivpal—were seen campaigning together. A few days later, the entire clan, including Akhilesh’s wife Dimple Yadav, met at the family home in Saifai on voting day. His sister-in-law Aparna Yadav, who joined BJP, was, however, not present.

Waiting at the Ayodhya rally site, Sarbahadur Maurya, who runs a small hotel, says “Akhilesh is better than Mulayam. He is younger and more educated.” The first battle out of his father’s shadow, a victory over BJP would give SP a new lease of life and push Akhilesh into the league of leaders on the national political stage. A defeat would mean another five years of his political life in near oblivion. As of now, he has picked up the gauntlet. ■

AS HE TRIES TO TURN A NEW LEAF, LEARNING FROM THE PAST, AKHILESH IS REINVENTING SP. WITH A SINGLE GOAL—DEFEATING BJP. UNDER ATTACK FOR ‘LAWLESSNESS’ DURING HIS TENURE, HE HAS TRIED TO DUST OFF THE TAINT ADOPTING A ZERO-TOLERANCE APPROACH TO CRIME

MUSIC, LYRICS AND POLITICS

CHASING THE SOUNDTRACK OF THE ELECTION

By **LHENDUP G BHUTIA**

RANJEET RAHI LIES on a bed in the passageway that connects his studio to the control room, his left leg wrapped heavily in bandages. Just the day before, a metal rod was implanted in Rahi's leg to fix a broken bone, and there is visible anguish on his face.

Suddenly, someone shrieks from the studio inside, "*China ka kya baat kare?/kabza kar raha Nepal* (What do we talk of China/Even Nepal is occupying some of our territory)." And a wave of anger rearranges Rahi's face. An error in enunciation has occurred, and Rahi screams out an expletive. But that is unnecessary. Tensions are already running high.

Sitting in the control room, a visually challenged singer-cum-

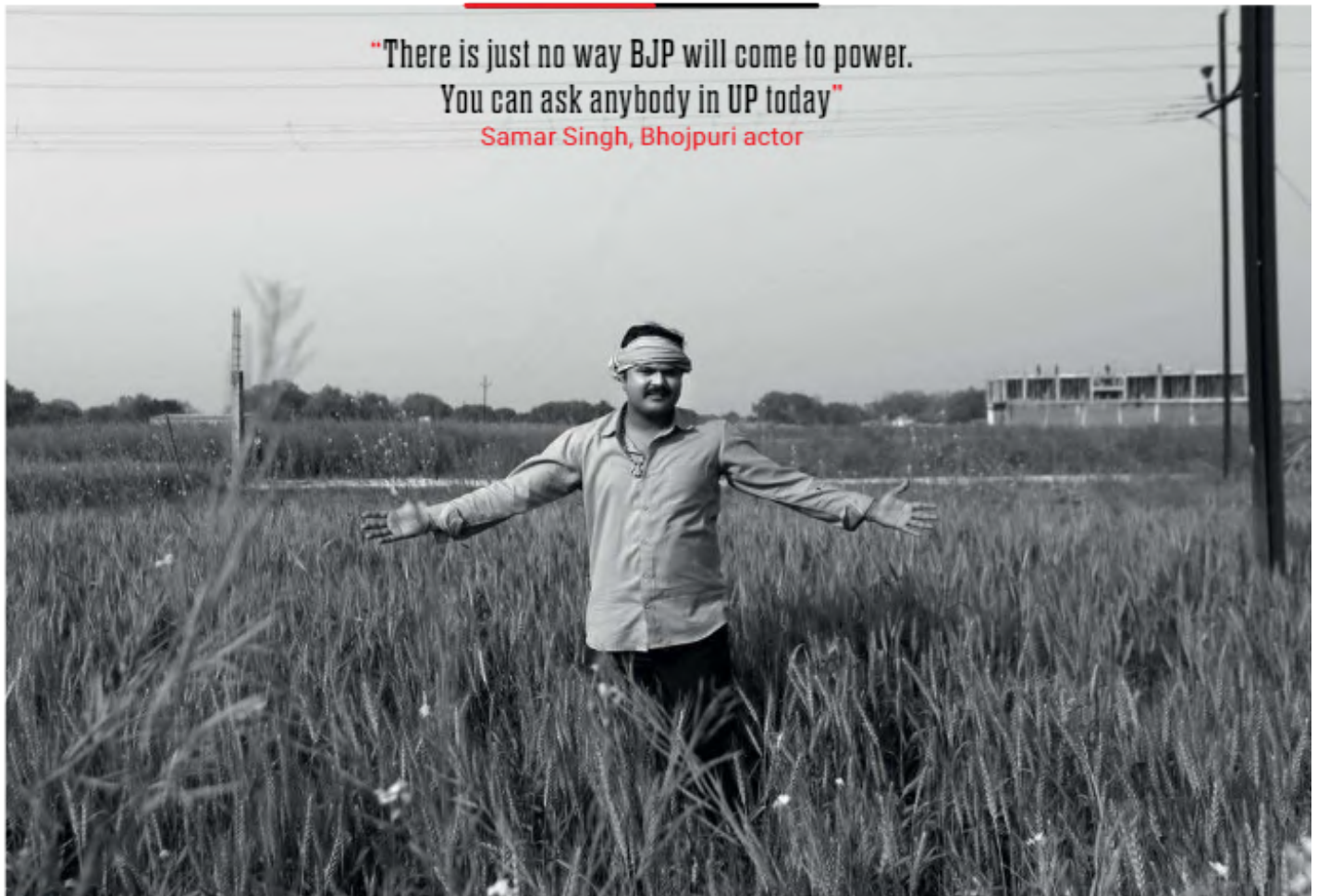
lyricist named Nitin Lagan is providing supporting vocals today. And across the glass that separates the control room from the recording studio is the singer with the moniker Anjana who, if you press him, will tell you that his name is Ghulam Nabi, and who stands today, bent over a stool, rewriting passages of his new song while enduring the expletives and directives raining down upon him from the passageway outside.

We are in Jaunpur, a city in the eastern end of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Just a little over a week remains before the final phase of the state election here, and work has never been busier.

Rahi's studio specialises in making songs for Bhojpuri films. But during elections, like many studios elsewhere in this area,

Photographs by **ASHISH SHARMA**

**"There is just no way BJP will come to power.
You can ask anybody in UP today"**
Samar Singh, Bhojpuri actor



the music composed is almost entirely political. Studios such as this serve a crucial need of electoral politics in UP—churning out eardrum-shattering numbers that can be played out at rallies, online music videos that can juice up manifestos and run down a party's rivals, and songs that can spread on mobile phones and help give local candidates' campaigns a little more thrust.

Rahi estimates he has composed about 250 campaign songs in just the last few months. His singers today—Lagan and Gabi—are incredibly prolific. They write their own songs, sing them, and with a little help from Rahi, also arrange their own music. The two have been up all night writing songs for the Samajwadi Party (SP). These will be recorded in a single day, and released the day after. The two also make for an interesting bunch. Gabi runs a chicken shop nearby and moonlights as a singer of SP's songs. Lagan, who writes and sings songs for Bhojpuri films, sings for any party for a fee. There is a third singer around today, Ullan Soni, who runs a jewellery store nearby, and who has received an order for some BJP songs.

This is the reality of much of the music being produced in the ongoing elections. Chicken shop owners, visually challenged singers and small-time jewellers, comprising an invisible work-

force, churning out songs for multiple parties in studios that make both Bhojpuri film and political propaganda songs.

MUSIC HAS ALWAYS played a part in UP elections. But it has never been this prominent. Covid-19-induced restrictions on campaigning have pushed parties and candidates to find more creative means, such as music production, to drum up support. From releasing multiple official tracks using the help of established artists to having small studios such as Rahi's to produce quick catchy numbers, from devotional music to rap songs, from the songs of the Bahujan community to protest tracks put up by commoners, the music industry around the elections in UP has never been this prominent in recent history.

If there is one song that has come to dominate the soundtrack of BJP's election campaign, it is '*Hum Ram Ko Layenge*' (whose first lines go, '*Jo Ram ko laye hai/Hum unko layenge*' or 'Those who have brought Ram/We will bring them to power').

Using the heady cocktail of religion and politics, the song—sung by the devotional singer Kanhaiya Mittal—urges people to vote for those who have brought back Ram. It has become so popular that one finds it playing almost everywhere in the

"Bhojpuri music is stuck in all these blouse hooks and lehenga strings right now when it can really be a way to capture people's imagination"

Neha Singh Rathore, Bhojpuri folk singer



state, from crowded political rallies, inside cars, even at weddings. And Mittal has been touring not just UP but also Punjab and Uttarakhand to sing versions of this song in favour of the BJP units there. "I first sang this song at a function attended by a BJP councillor in early December. Suddenly, BJP felt this is good. Then they worked on it and it went viral. In less than a month, I was sitting in front of Yogiiji (at a function) singing this song to him," he says.

But while a devotional song has become the anthem of this election for BJP, the anthem at the other end has turned out to be one not commissioned by an opposition party, or composed by some famous singer, but by a young woman on YouTube singing and complaining about the government in rustic, folksy ballads.

It all began with a riff on the song '*Bambai Mein Ka Ba?*' What's there in Mumbai?', sung by the actor Manoj Bajpayee to highlight the plight of Bihar's working class in 2020. Neha Singh Rathore, originally from a village in Bihar's Kaimur district, who moved to a hostel in Varanasi after her college education because, as she says, the internet here is more reliable, made the song her own with her version '*Bihar Mein Ka Ba*' during the Bihar Assembly polls in 2020. Rathore has now come out with three '*UP Mein Ka Ba*' songs, apart from other songs, and she's become something of a household name among the young internet-savvy generation of UP voters.

Only 24 years old, Rathore is representative of a new and confident generation of citizens coming of age in India's smaller towns and cities. "I wish I had some nice story to say about how I began singing, but there is none," she jokes. Her mother would sing folk songs at weddings sometimes, she says, and occasionally, when pestered, she would sing too. She put up her first folk song on YouTube in 2018 (in favour of the Swachh Bharat Mission), and has since been singing on several issue-based subjects. Rathore views herself as a *jankavi* (people's poet) and a *jangayak* (people's singer), and she feels it is incumbent upon her to goad

people to question their government's performance when they come seeking votes again.

Hersongs serve another purpose. Rathore hopes that she can help rehabilitate Bhojpuri music from the double entendres and sleaze it has been reduced to in Bhojpuri films. "It is stuck in all these blouse hooks and *lehenga* strings right now," she says. "When it can really be a way to capture people's imagination and talk about the big issues of the day."

JUST A LITTLE over 70 km away from Rathore's location, a crowd of students has gathered in the corridors of the second floor of a pharmacy college in Jaunpur today to peep through small openings in the walls. Below in the garden stands the subject of their curiosity. Dressed in a simple grey shirt and trousers, a pair of flip flops on his feet, the Bhojpuri star Samar Singh pinches his eyes under the afternoon sun as he listens to the director explain the scene.

The shoot of a new Bhojpuri film, *Atoot Bandhan*, is underway. There are no vanity vans here or the Army of hangers-on one finds at Bollywood shoots. Outside the perimeter of the scene being shot, just a few people wait on Singh, their sunglasses resting not on their foreheads but at the back of their heads.

Bhojpuri films and their music are many things to many people. To some, they are tasteless productions. But to its audience, it is an industry that caters to the void left behind after Bollywood turned its back on the hinterland. It is also a fairly large film industry. A new crop of Bhojpuri stars are rising, with the likes of Singh making space for themselves alongside established names. And like many other Bhojpuri stars during election time, Singh is also much in demand.

Singh is one of SP's star campaigners. "Everywhere it (the election contest) is a little tight, I need to go there," he says. Singh, who like many other male Bhojpuri stars sings and acts in his films,



"Give me one name in Bollywood who can do what we do as quickly as we do"

Nitin Lagan
singer and lyricist

"How can we say we live in a democracy when those in the Bahujan samaj continue to get threatened like this?"

Vishal Ghazipuri
Bhimgeet singer



VISHAL GHAZIPURI AND SAPNA BAUDH

has sung two songs for the party in this election, with '*Janata Uttar Pradesh ke/mangat ba Akhilesh ke, button dabiya cycle ke*' becoming especially catchy.

Singh draws up a chair, drinking milky tea from a small plastic cup, as he launches shortly into a laundry list of all that has gone wrong in the state over the last five years. "There is just no way BJP will come to power. You can ask anybody in UP today," he says.

THE DRIVE FROM Lucknow to eastern UP can feel like a journey through time. The impressive Purvanchal Expressway, opened to the public only some months ago, transforms into a small crowded road as we turn to Ghazipur, stray cows constantly holding up traffic, the urban rapidly turning into the countryside. A thin sleet of winter fog clings to the fields. As the sun rises, and the fog expands in its light, it gives the distinct impression of smoke covering entire kilometres of fields. We travel from one pointed finger to another, through crowded bazaars, lanes and farmlands, until we arrive at the doorstep of a house only half complete.

Inside, Vishal Ghazipuri and Sapna Baudh sit on plastic chairs, their three-year-old son moving in and out of rooms, the roof above entirely absent. Ghazipuri and Baudh, who belong to the Bahujan community, are missionary or what is known as Bhimgeet singers. They move through towns performing songs about the life and times of BR Ambedkar and other anti-caste leaders. Ghazipuri, who often experienced casteist slurs or prejudice at studios in Delhi where he travelled to record his songs, even established his own studio in Ghazipur a few years ago.

The couple started doing well. They purchased a car, started building a house for Ghazipuri's parents, and began to dream of a brighter future. Then, two years ago, Ghazipuri felt he should

expand his range to also sing songs centred on contemporary issues. All hell broke loose.

The two continued to upload songs like '*Aaya Desh Vikreta/ Here comes the person who sells the country*', '*Ek Tha Hitler, Ek Hai Jhootler*' and '*Nijikaran Dhokha Hai/Privatisation is a scam*'—all critical of BJP—online, even as threats from anonymous individuals started pouring in. These threats continued to escalate, often filled with vile casteist remarks, and in October 2020, the couple's studio was set on fire. With the police allegedly dragging their feet on the case, and the two intent on not stopping being critical of the government, they had no recourse but to flee. Along with their then two-year-old child, the couple remained in hiding all of last year, staying at one spot for just a few weeks at a time before moving to the next. When they did get sloppy once, in March last year, they found a vehicle blocking the path of their car, and a group of men carrying guns threatening them to withdraw their cases.

"How can we say we live in a democracy when those in the Bahujan samaj continue to get threatened like this?" asks Ghazipuri.

The two have only recently started living in the open again. The incidents of the last two years have set the couple back considerably. Without being able to perform openly, they have been able to neither complete building Ghazipuri's parents' house nor restart their studio. The two, like many others in the Bahujan community, are loyal supporters of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Even though there is little or no party support, singers such as Ghazipuri and Baudh move through the state campaigning for votes for the party.

About 100 km away at Rahi's recording studio in Jaunpur, despite the constant bickering between Gabi and Lagan, the two share a brief moment of camaraderie. Lagan raises his face from the mike and says, "Give me one name in Bollywood who can do what we do as quickly as we do."

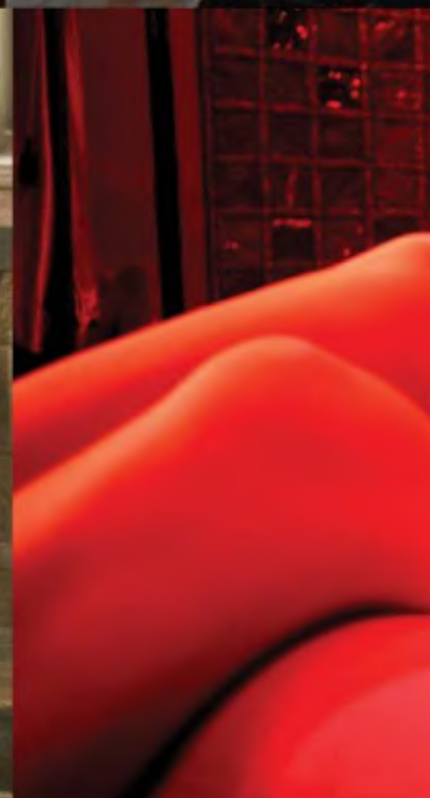
Inside the studio, Gabi reveals a toothy smile. ■



ALIA BHATT IN
GANGUBAI KATHIAWADI



KAREENA KAPOOR
IN CHAMELI



CINEMA

THE WHITE SWAN

The film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* wants to valorise sex workers on the margins of society but its morality is confused

By Kaveree Bamzai

T

HERE IS A scene in the recently released *Gangubai Kathiawadi* where the women of the brothel come to young Gangu (played by Alia Bhatt) with a white saree, saying from now on she will not sleep with any customer. The white signifies purity, chastity, and virginity, implying that their work is dirty, unclean and impure. In one fell swoop, director Sanjay Leela Bhansali undoes decades of work done culturally and socially to make sex work respectable, ironically the very thing the real Gangubai fought long and hard for.

Make no mistake. There is enough rhetoric in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* about how sex work is like any other profession. After she wins an election that makes her president of the Kamathipura ward in Mumbai, Gangu enunciates the three principles of sex work: the dishonest work should be done with honesty, the customer should get full satisfaction, and life should be lived with *izzat* (honour). But in reality Bhansali's film violates all the principles, taking us back to the binary of heroine/vamp, good girl/bad girl, girl next door/prostitute.

It also undoes all the good work done by movies such as Sudhir Mishra's *Chameli* (2003) and Anurag Kashyap's *Deu.D* (2009), where prostitution is seen less as exploitation and more as a choice. It is no accident that both women playing the characters, Kareena Kapoor and Kalki Koechlin, are fair or white, heightening the contrast between the work they're doing and their perceived beauty. Bhansali plays on the same paradox of the virgin/vamp when his Gangubai is

KALKI KOECHLIN
IN *DEV.D*

played by the mixed-race beauty Alia Bhatt, whose skin colour stands in stark contrast to the rest of the women in the brothel. In a particularly terrifying scene Gangubai's unmarked, pristine skin is marred by a series of assaults on her, even as the languorously ugly madame, played with louche charm by Seema Pahwa offers fake sympathy. The sight of the madame's destroyed face, coarsened by age, contrasted with Bhatt's brutalised beauty is painful and elicits a collective intake of breath by the entire theatre.

This brutalisation is meant to show us how vile the business of sex work is. White is a leitmotif in the movie. At one point in the movie, Gangubai tells her tailor/lover of the many shades of white there are—the white of the moon, clouds, paper, rose, *barfi*, salt, milk, the conch shell. The tailor chooses the white of the swan instead, those docile creatures of the lake. *Dhanda* (business) is *dharam* (religion) for Gangubai, greater than anything else in her life. "*Agar per nahin phailaoge to hath phalaine padenge* (If you don't spread your legs, you will have to beg)," says a character in the movie.

IN SPIRIT IT seems to be similar to movies about sex workers in the past. But it does not have the unabashed arrogance about it as Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* (1983), which was briefly banned by the Central Board of Film Certification for the promotion of prostitution. "The CBFC felt the women were not apologetic about their work," says Benegal to me on the phone from Mumbai. The filmmaker, now 87, had to write to the prime minister for it to be finally cleared. When it was finally released, columnist Sunil Sethi wrote about it, saying: "It's the first time an Indian movie cuts out the sticky cheap drivel about courtesans and *kothas* and shows it as it really is: garish and seedy, reckless and heartless, make believe and hard to believe."

Gangubai Kathiawadi undoes all the good work done by movies such as Sudhir Mishra's *Chameli* (2003) and Anurag Kashyap's *Dev.D* (2009), where prostitution is seen less as exploitation and more as a choice

But at the heart of it was the same dilemma, which runs through *Gangubai*. Society's attempts to rid itself of its "filth". As in *Gangubai*, so in *Mandi*, the quarrel is over land. A real estate developer promises Gangubai and her ally Rahim Lala (Ajay Devgn) a flat each in exchange for their eviction from Kamathipura. "*Jiska aasmaan pura ho, usko choohe ke bil ka lalach de rahe ho* (You are trying to woo us with ratholes of flats, we, who are so accustomed to live expansively)," says Rahim Bhai to the real estate developer.

In *Mandi* too, Shabana Azmi's brothel is removed twice. Each time though customers make their way to the new brothel and create a new town around it. "Historically that is what happened," says Benegal, pointing out how the red-light district came up in Old Hyderabad around Charminar when members of a substantial harem of the last Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan, fell out of favour. They had to move out of the Chowmahalla Palace of Hyderabad and start living in the town. They fell into the flesh trade.

The courtesan trope is well established in Hindi cinema, with the films *Pakeezah* (1972) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981) being the epitome of that tradition. Its slow death, as the connoisseurs died, leaving only the pleasure of the body, not its performance, was captured quite beautifully in *Kalank* (2019) in the character of Bahaar Begum, played with grace by Madhuri Dixit. Shibani Bathija, who wrote the story of the film, says Bahaar Begum was her tribute to the "old days" when the *kothas* were centres of art. "The finest expo-

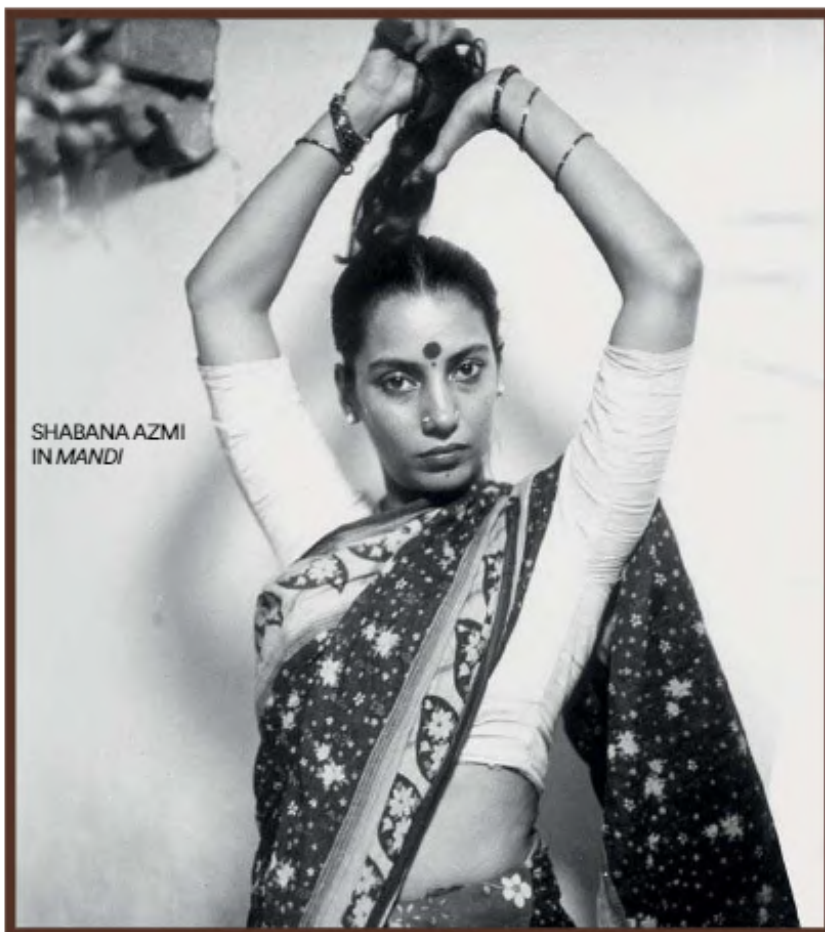
nents of dance and music performed there. And these were very separate people to the 'prostitutes'. They sometimes were 'maintained' by a patron. But on an exclusive basis. This 'artist' was who Bahaar was to me."

There are echoes of this in the terrifying but liberating last scene in Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Dastak* (1970) where a typical '*seth*' comes to a courtesan's old haunt, now occupied by a young couple where the wife has a love for music and is mistaken for a singing girl.

More recently, in Sudhir Mishra's *Chameli*, Kareena Kapoor goes against her fashionista image to play a Mumbai prostitute, legs akimbo, cigarette between lips and a full-throated laugh as her trademark. She was seen as a woman with a life of her own, an entire ecosystem around her, including an orphan whose studies she paid for. A chance meeting with an uptight investment banker on a rainy Mumbai night and she tells him that her life is a lie, without any self-flagellation.

Chanda, played by Kalki Koechlin, the sex worker in *Dev.D* is even less worried about what society thinks, having been psychologically brutalised by the scandal around a sex video she was in. She has none of Chandramukhi's pathos (from Sarat Chandra's *Devdas*): "*Tauwaifon ki to takdeer hi nahin hoti* (Prostitutes have no destiny)," Chandramukhi says to a taunt: "*Tauwaifon ki takdeer main shohar nahin hote* (Prostitutes are not destined to have husbands)."

It echoes what another famous sex worker in Hindi cinema says to her hero (Amitabh Bachchan) in *Deewaar* (1975). As Anita, played by Parveen



SHABANA AZMI
IN *MANDI*

At the heart of *Mandi* (1983) was the same dilemma, which runs through *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. Society's attempts to rid itself of its 'filth'. In both, the quarrel is over land

Babi, dies in her hero's arms, she says tearfully: "I have been dead for a long time. I am being reborn today." It's a far cry from the confident Anita who approaches Vijay for the first time, in a shimmering dress, cigarette and drink in hand: "I was waiting for an opportunity to talk to you. There is no one as handsome as you in this bar, nor anyone as lonely." Naturally, she cannot live for long.

There is none of that self-pity in Kareena Kapoor's Simran/Rosie, a

sex worker in *Talaash* (2012), where (spoiler alert) her ghost ends up helping Aamir Khan playing the role of a police officer to solve a crime. *Talaash* gives the sex workers the kind of inner life *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) did so beautifully, with the relationship between Sola Saal (Chanda Sharma) and the tea boy, showing the little cruelties and the little tenderness that is possible. But it is also about how little the sex workers' lives are worth.

As Rosie says in *Talaash*, "A woman

vanishes and no one cares to find out what happened to her for three years." Reema Kagti, who directed and co-wrote the film with Zoya Akhtar says, "Rosie is unapologetic about her profession. She is Zoya and my testimony to the fact that 20 million sex workers exist."

That is one of the demands the real and reel Gangubai makes of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in the film, asking for legalisation of sex work only to hear a firm no. The Nehrus figure in the back story of *Mandi* too. The film was based on a classic Urdu short story *Aanandi* by writer Ghulam Abbas, which told of a true incident relating to Allahabad of the 1920s. Benegal was told the story by noted Sindhi writer Amritlal Nagar at whose *haveli*, ironically situated in the heart of the then red-light district of Lucknow, he shot *Junoon* (1978). The story goes that as a young lawyer Motilal Nehru was often questioned about living in Meeraganj, a notorious red-light area of Allahabad, and he would shrug it away saying everyone had an equal right to existence.

Whenever it's a matter of land, the most vulnerable and the weakest are the first to be kicked out, points out Benegal. Something similar has happened to the real Kamathipura (and not Bhansali's Art Deco version). The resettlement of the sex workers' quarters has caused the flesh trade to disperse. Most of the buildings are across 39 acres and over 100 years old. There are 700 buildings and chawls with approximately 5,000 tenants. In 1992, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation recorded there were 45,000 sex workers, which reduced to 1,600 in 2009 and 500 in 2018.

When the missionary school in the neighbourhood protests against the brothels in Kamathipura, Alia Bhatt's Gangubai points out the brothels have been there for 100 years and the school is merely 40 years old. Yet it's the women who've got to leave.

But in real and reel life, where they go, the men follow. ■

We Were Bereft. As Daughters. And As Citizens

A journalist's personal, yet universal, grief during the pandemic

By Barkha Dutt



Barkha Dutt with her father SP Dutt and sister Bahar Dutt

Image Courtesy BARKHA DUTT

THEY SAY IT gets better with time. But it doesn't really. The first thing that has altered in my life is that I cannot listen to music anymore.

My father, SP Dutt, Speedy Dutt to friends and family alike, used to spend hours at his ramshackle workstation, sitting in a corner of his airless room amid a mountain of books, dusty files and meccano toys that he had designed and built, listening to music on internet radio stations.

Christmas carols, soft rock, Santana—there was a 24/7 loop of music on his ageing Apple desktop.

Every time I hear the opening chords of a song, a memory draws me back to that image of him and I feel the pain cut me like a knife.

It seems easier to not listen to any music at all.

I had begun to think of myself as peculiar till I read an account by Michelle Zauner in the *New Yorker* about how she would collapse in tears every time she went to shop at H-Mart, the Korean supermarket chain; the dry food cans triggered an immediate association with her mother.

Memory can be a beast.

That is my abiding personal lesson from the pandemic.

Before his death, my sister Bahar and I always valorized our mother, Prabha Dutt, whom we lost when I was just thirteen years old to a brain haemorrhage. She was a flamboyant, volatile, tempestuous counterfoil to the gentle,

unassuming, kindly and eccentric man her husband was. Among the first generation of women journalists in India, she was the automatic headline story of our family. Notoriously rebellious, she was India's first woman war correspondent, reporting from the front line of the India-Pakistan war in 1965 by herself, armed with only a notepad and pen. We grew up in her shadow, moulded by extraordinary stories of how she once jumped into a hippopotamus enclosure to chase a story, how she petitioned the court and entered the annals of Indian case law by insisting on interviewing child murderers Billa and Ranga before they were executed, and how she exposed corruption and wrongdoing through her writings in the *Hindustan Times*. She was a legend, and because she died so young—she was just forty—the memory of her grew larger than life in our heads.

It was easy to take the person right in front of us—our dad—for granted.

It took losing him to Covid for me to realize how he had been the epicenter of my existence.

It took his death for me to understand how traumatized he must have been, especially as a single parent, every time I left for an assignment to a dangerous hotspot. I remember his protestations and anxieties two decades ago when I was dispatched to report on the Kargil war in 1999; I was dismissive, impatient and stubborn. And the truth is, he set me free, entirely so, even when he had to sit on his hands.

Every day I curse myself for not appreciating him as fully as I should have when he was alive.

And now it is too late.

I have lost count of the number of daughters I have met in my travels across India who are similarly haunted. By loss. By regret. By anger. By what-ifs.

And by memory.

In April 2021, during the peak of the second wave, one of Mumbai's most popular radio jockeys, Samridhi Saxena, better known as RJ Sam, desperately reached out to me in the hope that I could help her father with an oxygen cylinder. He had tested positive for Covid in 2020

and survived. Now he was struggling with a rare neurodegenerative disease and was on assisted breathing. Oxygen was as critical to keep him alive as it was for someone whose respiratory system was hit badly by the virus. Sam was ready to beg, borrow and steal, and did everything she could. She went on to Twitter, called everyone she knew, cried in front of strangers, folded hands in humility, snapped in exasperation. 'If someone is a non-Covid patient, doesn't he have the right to live? Doesn't he have the right to medical facilities?' Sam had created an ICU at home for her father, renting specialized equipment at the cost of ₹100,000 a month. But she could not get a single oxygen station in Mumbai to refill his now-depleted cylinders. 'I don't think he will survive,' she said, breaking down. A cylinder that normally cost ₹5,000 before the second wave had escalated to ₹9,000

All I could do was listen, share their pain and tell their stories. From Patna, another heartbroken daughter, Manisha, called me to say her fifty-three-year-old father would die because Ford Hospital, where both he and his wife were admitted for Covid, was asking the family to move him. 'He is critical, his oxygen is falling,' Manisha spoke breathlessly, as if her own heart would come to a crashing halt any moment. Like so many hospitals across India, this one too was dealing with a depleting supply in its ICU. Its administration advised that Manisha should either go out and organize the oxygen or find another medical facility. 'My father sent me a text message yesterday,' Manisha told me, 'since then I have heard nothing.' She knew the worst was imminent.

In Bengaluru I met twenty-one-year-old Bharini who asked me a question I had no answer to. 'How strong am I

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in February 2021, and during the peak of the surge was as much as ₹45,000 in the black market.

Betrayed by the state and the system, citizens formed a community of their own for support during the worst months of the second wave. As we travelled through India, we were approached often by complete strangers who would track us down on social media or hunt down our number and cold-call us, in the desperate hope that we could do something that doctors had been unable to.

Usually, we were even more helpless than they were.

expected to be?' We were in her kitchen, seated on the ledge talking. I was still trying to wrap my head around her extraordinary tragedy. She lost her biological parents when she was very young and was adopted by her mother's sister and her husband. In 2021, she lost her adoptive father to a heart attack; later in the year her mother died from Covid. Though Bharini dreamt of being an IAS officer, on the day I met her she described herself as someone who was 'emotionally, mentally and financially broken'.

I was speechless. My own pain seemed unworthy compared to the magnitude of

what she was struggling with.

But then, as Joan Didion, who also died in 2021, had first taught us, 'A single person is missing for you and the whole world is empty.'

Journalist Stutee Ghosh and I shared the sense of dissonance that came from remaining functional while you have a parent locked away in hospital, whom you have no access to. We spoke of the callousness of a glitzy IPL cricket tournament, a cash-rich advertising property, running right through the crisis, suspended only when players started testing positive despite their 'bio-bubble'. And we mirrored each other's persistent, gnawing guilt—that somehow we were letting down our fathers; and guilty also that even in the worst moment of our lives we were distinctly better off than hundreds of thousands of other Indians, just by the fact that our dads were in hospital, and we outside the closed gates of one. 'For the past nine days, I wake up with my phone and I go to sleep with my phone and when I am not calling someone for my father, I am, like everyone else, receiving or sending SOS messages for others, for an oxygen cylinder, or a bed, or medicine, or a concentrator, or warm food. I don't even know where the IPL is being played,' said Stutee. Her father, like mine, didn't make it. And, over the weeks, her grief mutated, like the virus, into rage at 'the indignity in death for so many Indians who are dying and not even being counted by the government.'

We were bereft. As daughters. And as citizens.

In April 2021, when the news first came from Delhi that my father had tested positive for Covid, I was on the road chasing the virus in Maharashtra, which at that point had the highest number of cases. I was sitting on the pavement outside the crematorium in Ghatkopar in Mumbai, fighting back tears as an elderly man in his nineties sat stoically in a wheelchair, waving a silent goodbye to his wife.

Initially, my father's infection seemed mild, and though he was in his eighties and a long-time patient of

diabetes, the doctors thought it was easily manageable at home. That evening, on my digital platforms, I wrote about needing to find the balance between being a distraught daughter and a clear-headed, committed professional. I carried on reporting, travelling through the smaller towns of Maharashtra and onwards to Gujarat, where in Surat there were so many people dying every day that two iron furnaces at one of the city's biggest crematoriums had melted and corroded because too many corpses had been lit on them.

But when my father's fever persisted, I cut short my reporting assignment and flew back, a process that came with its own delays, because I first needed an all-clear on a Covid test.

Now I was on the other side; I was the protagonist instead of the chronicler. It was surreal, but also debilitating. I was so much more used to asking the questions, offering empathy, reflecting the rage. Suddenly, as the protagonist of my own sadness, I did not know how to cope. That day was the last day I would see my father alive

I went to see him in the home where I had lived with him pretty much all my life up until the age of forty. My father's family, that once lived in a giant *kothi* with pillars made of white marble, dozens of rooms, fountains out in the infinite green lawns and a grand piano in its chandeliered living room, left Sialkot in pre-Partition Punjab and arrived in Delhi as penniless refugees. The capital took in half a million refugees before August 1947. My grandfather, Krishan Gopal Dutt, imprisoned during the freedom movement, died before I was born. His sons were allotted a small plot in colonies (like Jangpura Extension, where we stayed) that were created for such migrants near and around Nizamuddin

station, where most of the Punjab trains had arrived. Before the 1950s, Lodi Road formed the southern tip of the capital; beyond it were 'open fields, where jackals howled and black bucks roamed'.

On this reorganized land was our home, simply called 'J', the central nerve for a sprawling, close-knit family of cousins, aunts, friends and friends of friends, who all treated my dad's home as an open house for sleepovers and Sunday meals.

My father insisted he was improving.

As proof, he stood in the doorway of his bedroom and waved to me to go back to my own apartment. 'I am much better, see, I am walking.' I took a photograph of that moment that I haven't been able to look at again, since his death.

On the eighth day, his condition deteriorated and his fever spiked. The doctors said they would prefer him to be admitted to hospital. For us this was not an easy decision; for one we would be isolating him and leaving him alone. But we went by medical advice. How would we get a room, though? It was the end of April, and the wave was a tsunami.

From this moment on I became the news I had reported all these months. From begging for space in hospital to the anxiety over falling oxygen to researching the pros and cons of remdesivir, I was suddenly telling the Covid story in the first person.

Naresh Trehan, the celebrated surgeon, generously agreed that my dad

could be brought to a general room at Medanta, the hospital he helmed. I convinced my reluctant father that we had to leave home by assuring him that he had permission to keep his own nursing attendant overnight, since he was not being admitted to the ICU. I promised him that once a series of tests was done, I would bring him home in two days.

I failed to keep my word.

On Tuesday morning, on 20 April, my father climbed down the steps of our home in crumpled blue pyjamas, taking the help of the polished wooden railing to slowly make his way down, shrugging off even then the help of the attendant. He was due for his second vaccine shot that very week.

The hospital's ambulances were busy till the afternoon. We panicked and, in what became one of the many decisions I have come to regret, started hunting for a private vehicle.

When the 'ambulance' arrived it turned out to be an old Maruti van that had been repurposed for the task. It had a crew of one; the driver and no accompanying paramedics. I glanced at the back. There was no stretcher, just the hard, flat grey slab of a worn-out seat. My eye travelled to an oxygen cylinder on the floor. Does it work, I asked the driver. He assured me it did. Then he suddenly asked me if we could provide the mask for oxygen. Suspicious of the infrastructure, I told him we would not travel with him if he was not fully equipped with a kit to administer the oxygen. He produced a mask and guaranteed me that everything was in order. By now, caught between panic and fear, I decided to take the chance and not lose more time. We helped our father on to the back. I sat in the front seat with the driver.

Along the way we encountered random police checkpoints every few kilometres, set up to enforce the city's lockdown. They perilously slowed down a stream of ambulances, leading to a traffic snarl that could have made the difference between life and death. The driver had no idea of how to get to Medanta, and so I had one eye on Google Maps, another on my father at the back. 'Is he breathing,'

I repeatedly asked his nurse. Over the noise of the traffic and the rickety vehicle we were in, my father motioned his hand at me in a wave, as if to say everything will be all right.

But by the time we reached the Medanta ICU my father's oxygen levels after an hour of being on a cylinder had plummeted. The young doctor on the emergency shift told me that the mask fixed to the cylinder had not administered high-flow oxygen as it ought to have and my father was no longer in any condition to be admitted to a room as we had promised him. He needed to go straight to the ICU. And, naturally, there was no bed free immediately. My father was extricated from that sham of an ambulance, placed in a wheelchair, wheeled into the open lobby of the hospital and given a different oxygen cylinder. I stroked his hair and hugged him; he was barely conscious or cognizant of his surroundings. He had aged ten years in that hour. He sat hunched over, his hands limp, his face impassive.

Even in that horrific moment, when my heart was quite literally in my throat, I knew that my upper-class privilege, my relative access to monetary and other resources, made my father luckier than many Indians. After all, this is what I had spent months and months doing—telling the stories of those who were dying at the gates of hospitals, sometimes on the streets, because the healthcare system had crumbled.

Now I was on the other side; I was the protagonist instead of the chronicler. It was surreal, but also debilitating. I was so much more used to asking the questions, offering empathy, reflecting the rage. Suddenly, as the protagonist of my own sadness, I did not know how to cope. That day was the last day I would see my father alive.

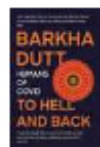
Over the next two days I managed only a crackly Facetime call with him on the doctor's mobile. Dad was hard of hearing and often used to piece together what we were saying by reading our lips. Unable to talk or hear and visibly uncomfortable with all the contraptions strapped to him, he formed a half

sentence: 'I am choking, treat me.'

The hospital's doctors tried their best and I shall forever be grateful for that.

My father used to be an Air India executive in the glory years of the airline. Unlike his more contrarian and confrontational daughters, he was a universally liked man with perfect people skills. But at heart he was really a man of science. He walked out of a secure, salaried job when we were still in college, to dabble with entrepreneurship and the stuff he really loved—mathematics, meccano, and making things with his hands. A geeky inventor, he sometimes pulled apart electronic gadgets just so that he could experience the joy of reassembling them. In the now-locked cupboard of his room, saved between sheaths of tissue, is a newspaper clipping from his years in Modern School. It's a six-column story on the brilliant young boy who made a rocket that actually worked. As a young adult he built a vending machine for Cadbury chocolates well before the concept had arrived in India. We preserved it in our home with the love and awe one might feel for a museum piece. Over the years we stopped noticing it because it literally became part of the furniture. But I remember it vividly: white, curved at four edges, it looked like a small refrigerator, except for a black scrawl across its middle, one that tantalizingly promised a chocolate bar would drop out from its belly, in exchange for an inserted 25paise coin.

Later he dabbled with other inventions, one of them a shoe shine machine eponymously named 'Speedshine', used for some years by the posh Gymkhana Club. He was fascinated with the idea of creating a roti-maker. And there were his meccano pieces—trains, jet planes, ships that sailed on water, robots that talked. I would urge him to start a bespoke collection for commercial sales; he'd just laugh. ■



This is an edited excerpt from To Hell and Back: Humans of Covid by Barkha Dutt (Juggernaut; 288 pages; ₹699)

STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI

AYUSHMANN
KHURRANA

CHUM DARANG

AKSHAY KHANNA

➤ Queer Love Story

Sometimes, it takes a bit longer to discover movies, and then when you do, it stays with you. *Badhaai Do* is one of them. I watched it in the third week of its release and was struck by the elegance with which a queer story is told. As a one-line concept, it must have been stellar. A lesbian woman marries a gay man in a lavender marriage and the families stop harassing them about "settling down". But the way each character, including their individual lovers, has been delineated is most unusual in Hindi cinema. Queer people tend to be over-sexualised, points out the film's director Harshavardhan Kulkarni, who made the oddball *Hunterrr* (2015). One never sees a romantic relationship between two queer people, except perhaps in Onir's *My Brother...Nikhil* (2005) or in recent series, such as *The Fame Game*. In the gentle close dance between Bhumi Pednekar's character Sumi, and Rimjhim (played by newcomer Chum Darang) and in the silent gestures exchanged between Rajkumar Rao's Shardul Thakur and a stunning Gulshan Devaiah's Guru Narayan, Kulkarni has managed to assuage several lifetimes of hurt at being ignored, forgotten or simply closeted. The lingering knocking of legs, which Devaiah does so flirtatiously, and the touching of hands between Sumi and Rimjhim is framed in a way the heterosexual gaze is accustomed to. It is playful, romantic, sometimes cheeky, and often ironic. Some tropes are inverted with more than a dash of humour, like the rain sequence

where we expect the boy and girl to behave like boys and girls—and have been around in Hindi cinema since the time of *Aradhana* (1969) when a dreamy Rajesh Khanna clasped a shivering Sharmila Tagore to his chest to the iconic song, '*Roop Tera Mastana*'. Kulkarni has made a queer family drama and by setting it in Dehradun, he has captured the bottled-up aspirations of many young people who feel stifled leading double lives. But he has done it without speeches or rhetoric. "I wanted to show when queer people come out of the closet, the closet gets bigger. And also that they don't need validation from heterosexuals," he says. Someone called it the *Taare Zameen Par* of the LGBTQIA community, he says, referring to the 2007 Aamir Khan movie that put the spotlight on specially abled children.

➤ Arunachal Rocks

When Akshat Ghildiyal wrote *Badhaai Ho* (2018), Ayushmann Khurrana's girlfriend was meant to be from the Northeast, entirely possible in Delhi's vast community of northeastern students. It didn't happen. This time, with *Badhaai Do*, he was more successful and Bhumi's lover, a pathology lab assistant, is played by former Miss Asia World runner-up (2017), Chum Darang. The unintended consequence is that it opens up new markets. *Badhaai Do* is not only doing well commercially in Arunachal Pradesh but the film's team was also felicitated by the state chief minister, the young Pema Khandu. Chum, a winner of several

local and regional beauty pageants, is a well-known name in Arunachal, but *Badhaai Do* has made her a bigger star. She had auditioned for the role, one of several she had been doing, with little success. If she hadn't cut it this time, Chum had promised herself she would return home and open a school. Here's hoping Bollywood opens its heart and mind to this talented and fearless woman.

➤ Scene That

This month is a big one for diversity globally. While the first season of Shonda Rhimes' *Bridgerton* (Netflix) put the spotlight on Blacks, the second season showcases India, with at least two major characters being played by British women of Indian origin, Simone Ashley (actually Simone Ashwini Pillai), who plays Kate Sharma, will bewitch Anthony, the *Bridgerton* heir, and Charithra Chandran, will play her equally feisty sister, Edwina. It's not so wildly impossible. Though *Bridgerton* is set in the Regency period (1811 to 1820), there were quite a few Indian aristocrats in Victorian England (1837-1901), not the least of them being the Black Prince (a name the court gave Maharaja Duleep Singh in those tone-deaf times) and the woman he was supposed to marry, Princess Gouramma of Coorg. There are also at least two major ongoing series with big parts for Indian-origin Brits, the murder mystery *Chloe* with Akshay Khanna, and the wry *This Is Going To Hurt* with Ambika Mod playing a doctor with the National Health Service. ■

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